North·West ROMANCES

STORIES OF THE WILDERNESS FRONTIER

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APRIL, 1943

20¢

BUCKSKIN LOOT FOR LOBO-MEN

A Big, Complete Novel by KENNETH GILBERT

NOVELETS OF THE NORTHLAND WILDERNESS TRAILS by

FREDERICK L. NEBEL • WILLIAM R. COX

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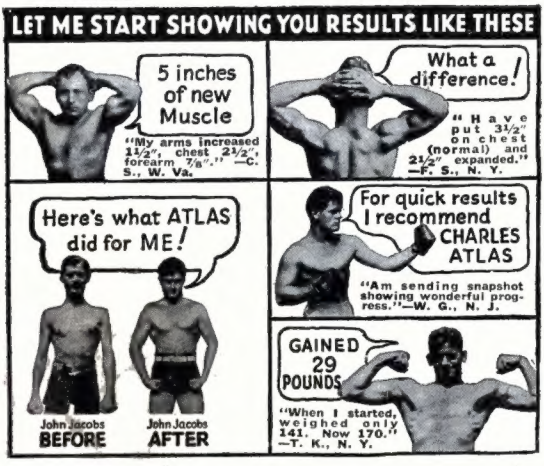
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Printed in U. S. A.

Dear Pop:

Even an old Rainbow Divisioner like you would pop your eyes at the army we're putting together this time. Let me tell you, they're doing everything to make up just about the best bunch of fighting galoots you ever saw.

And that goes for what they do for us off duty, too! Take this new clubhouse we got just outside of camp. It's got radios, dance floors, nice soft chairs and everything. And, Pop, you can get something to eat that won't cost you a month's pay!

Now, the army isn't running this. The USO is. And most of the other camps got USO clubs too, because you and a lot of other folks dug down and gave the money to the USO last year.

But, Pop, you know what's happened since then. Guys've been streaming into uniform. Last year there was less than 2 million of us. This year there'll be 4 million. And the USO needs a lot more dough to serve that many men—around 32,000,000 bucks I hear.

Now, Pop, I know you upped with what you could last time. But it would sure be swell if you could dig into the old sock again. Maybe you could get some of the other folks in the neighborhood steamed up, too.

It will mean an awful lot to the fellows in camp all over the country. Sort of show 'em the homefolks are backing them up. And, Pop, an old soldier like you knows that's a mighty nice feeling for a fellow to have. See what you can do, huh, Pop?

Bill

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USO

Send your contribution to your local USO Committee or to National Headquarters, USO, Empire State Building, New York, N. Y.

THUNDER *of the* NORTHLAND

A Surging Novelet of Chechako Courage

by

WILLIAM R. COX

Lew smashed Gandy's jaw, while Musky bulled Brown to the dirty floor.

Thunder of the Northland

By WILLIAM R. COX

One Texan had died in a snowland ambush; and now his partner stalked the tundra killers—trigger-vengeance in his mind, gun-weight sagging against his chest.

THE mackinaw, the furred mukluks the beaver-skin cap, all the appurtenances of the frozen country were still strange and uncomfortable to Lew Tolliver. He touched the gun's bulge beneath the short, heavy coat—the revolver should be swinging free, on his right flank, not tucked under there where it would take

him a week to get it out. He was in Thundercloud, the tough town of the Yukon frontier, and he might need that Colt equalizer.

Thundercloud had only one main street. It was wilder than Abilene, tougher than Dodge in the days of Hickok, Masterson and the Earps. And there weren't other Texans to throw in with a man, when the guns begin to shoot.

Lew was a lanky man, without cushions of flesh to withstand the cold. He had pale, blue eyes in a tanned face which showed him to be a chechako. He went into the saloon known as the Aurora Palace and blinked at the lights and the noise and the sound of the tinny piano.

The Aurora was the town's hot spot, the only place which sold decent liquor that Lew had found. It was garish, it had faro

tables galore, it had women. Fay Fancher sang there, and Morgan Carter owned the place, although it was run by a front man called Diamond Dave Dane. All this Lew Tolliver had learned in a week.

At the bar, Musky Rathbone was drinking alone. Musky always drank to get himself in shape for a spring mush to the newest gold camp. Musky was short and wide and scar-faced and almost broke, now that winter was about to crack up.

Lew shouldered to a place next the old sourdough. The mackinaw could be unbuttoned in the Aurora, and the gun butt was nearer Lew's fingers, which made his blue eyes more serene. He said, "Have this one on me."

Musky, he saw, was well along the way. The oldtimer spoke precisely, but slowly, spacing his words. "I will that. Why you always buying me drinks, Lew? Why you so good to Musky?"

Lew said, "Just for fun. Ain't we goin' out together? Ain't you takin' me on the run this spring?"

Musky drank the fresh drink, absently poured another. "That I am. That I am —though why a chechako with as much dinero as you got to spend should go after more gold. . . ."

This was bad. Lew glanced around. The barkeep was listening, open-mouthed. Diamond Dave was edging along the bar to a better spot for eavesdropping. Morgan Carter would soon hear Lew's answer. Morgan Carter's men were thicker than flies in Thundercloud. . . .

Musky was about to be insistent. Lew had not dared take the sourdough into his confidence—Musky drank too much and was far too forthright in his speech. The gun felt awful good about that moment, with Handy Gandy and Mose Brown hanging in the background, their mouths and eyes wide open, awaiting Dave's signal to start something.

It wasn't that Morgan Carter suspected Lew Tolliver of anything in particular, perhaps. It was just that Carter and his crowd had Thundercloud so tied up that any stranger from the States was suspect.

Lew knew all this—and a lot more he wasn't telling. If his anonymity was not preserved, he would not live an hour. Mose Brown and Handy Gandy, roughly-dressed giant miners, employees of Gold Incorporated, had killed plenty of men who opposed their boss.

Well, it was coming, then. Sooner or later the fuddled sourdough would unwittingly bring out a damning fact. Lew took a hearty slug of the whiskey and prayed that the gun would come loose, first try. He wasn't accustomed to the shoulder draw as yet.

There was only one law that he knew. If you're in danger, his dad had said, strike first. He wheeled around, saw Brown and Gandy almost upon him. He scowled, and his blue eyes went pale and deadly, like a lake before a storm.

HE stepped away from the bar. He could see Diamond Dave and the barkeep, but they didn't have immediate plans. They stood and stared. Musky turned and lowered his head like a billy goat, staring up at the two husky giants. Musky said. "Lew's pal of mine. Get outa here, bums!"

Brown reached back to throw a punch at Musky without further palaver. Gandy, undecided, took time to go for a knife in his boot.

Lew happily kicked hard with his right foot. He caught Gandy leaning over, and his toe landed right on the big man's mouth. Blood spurted and then Gandy was flattened and out of it.

Musky did not raise his head. He just took off from his braced position at the bar, going under Brown's wild swing, and then Musky's head hit Brown in the middle and the tough sat down. Musky kicked him in the jaw.

The gun slipped out of the holster with amazing ease. Lew was holding it steady, aiming at nothing in particular.

Diamond Dave was cat-eyed, coming forward. The barkeep had a sawed-off shotgun, but did not reach for it. Still, there were fifty others in there to do Morgan Carter's bidding—if Dave said the word.

Fay Fancher seemed to appear from no place. She was not in the room, because Lew always looked for her first thing. But suddenly there she was, at his side. She said, "Hiya, Texas? Feeling your oats tonight?"

Fay wore a spangled, tight dress, too short for the style of that day, unless Yukon

styles could be said to hold weight. Her black silk stockings moulded a pair of the prettiest legs in North America. Fay could not sing. She was far too lazy and prideful to dance, alone or with the clumsy-booted miners. But Fay Fancher's fame was spread from the border to the Circle.

She was a brunette, with a wide, sympathetic mouth and clever brown eyes. She looked like an houri—but Fay's stock in trade was her ability to listen. Fay never suffered from the pawings of sourdoughs. She listened to them for a price—to the stories of their failures and successes, to the tales of the folks back home, to anything a lonely man might want to talk about after spending months on the trail. Fay was the richest woman in Alaska, it was said.

Morgan Carter had hired her, first of all. She had opened with the Aurora, and there she remained, and it was said that Morgan would give the Aurora and half of Gold, Inc., if Fay would marry him. They were, it was conceded, the two smartest people in the north country—and the most powerful. Working together, they could do anything. . . .

[illegible] Dave stopped. Some message passed between him and the girl. He said, "Take it easy, Tolliver! You're liable to hurt someone!" His voice was smooth, palliating.

Lew recognized an out when he saw it. He promptly holstered the gun and said, "Mebbe I been drinkin' a little too much. But your boys, here, started it."

"No boys of mine," disclaimed Dave. He had ferret eyes and a hooked nose and an oily skin. He showed yellow teeth and gave orders for Brown and Gandy to be hauled out from underfoot. "Have a drink, Tolliver, and forget it."

Fay Fancher said, "Serve it in the back room—my room."

She smiled at Lew, nodding. "Come in and tell Fay," she said. "Get it off your chest—you'll feel better."

Musky said, "Rats. She's a repository of memories! Rats!"

Musky stayed at the bar, unmoved by riot or circumstance. Musky was catching up on his winter's drinking. Pretty soon he would have to quit and start the hardening-up process which brought him safely through every stampede of the Yukon.

II

MORGAN CARTER sat on the chair against the wall in Fay Fancher's room. Lew was not surprised to see the big man—it had been obvious in the barroom that suspicion was abroad and that Lew was *it*. Carter wore his favorite white felt hat, his tight, blue seagoing pea jacket. The two incongruous garments were his costume—he wore them all the time.

He was not a young man—he was over forty. His hair was iron grey, his smooth-shaven face was lined with deep ellipses that only time could etch. He pierced Lew Tolliver with his black, snapping eyes. Fay leaned against the closed door. There was something about Fay, the way she looked at Lew, that gave him more confidence than he would overwise have felt.

Right from the first day, Fay had been friendly. It was, of course, good politics for Fay, the go-between, the purveyor of every rumor and story to Morgan Carter, to be as close to a strayed Texan as possible. She had sought out Lew, listened to his fabricated yarn about the gold fever which had seized him, about the secret claim Musky was sharing, for a price.

But there was a warmth in Fay Fancher when she talked with Lew Tolliver, when she looked at his lean figure and sharp, clear-cut profile. Morgan Carter may have felt it, for he said mildly.

"Sit down, Tolliver. I've been wanting to talk to you. Fay says you're a straight shooter."

Lew abandoned pretense at drunkenness, recognizing the seriousness of the man and of Fay. There was a table and a shaded lamp, and they all drew up chairs. Lew said slowly,

"With my Colt, I shoot good."

Carter's voice became crisp. "I know that. There was another Texan here, name of Joe Main. He got killed. Shot in the dark, right on Main Street. I tried to find who did it, but there was nothing. . . . You're an *officer*, Tolliver!"

The accusation was direct, but not hostile in tone. For a moment Lew hesitated. Fay Fancher said,

"You are, Lew aren't you? You're looking for whoever killed Joe Main."

Lew exhaled. "You are pretty smart,"

he said. "I thought I was covered good."

"You must have been deputized by the federal government," said Carter equably. "You should have come to me at once, Tolliver. I'm not as bad as they tell you."

He gazed steadily at Lew. There was a rugged strength about this man, his compact figure, not taller than Lew, but heavier, more solid. In his frank gaze was something likable, something which drew Lew, yet repelled him, too. Lew said:

"I'm not callin' you any names, Carter. I just want to go my own way for a while. And I'm goin' out with Musky, too. I'm not foolin' about that gold hunt—and I hope Musky ain't. I got a sort of extended leave. I'm telling you straight. I got time to find out who murdered Joe Main."

"Joe Main was a wild man," said Carter gently. "He came up here and took to wearing his gun on his hip. He drank and roistered and made enemies. Someone bushwhacked him."

"He had a sister," said Fay softly. "He used to talk to me about her. I guess you know her—Elsie Main?"

Lew said without a flicker, "I know her."

"Pretty, isn't she?" asked Fay. Her eyes glowed at him for an instant. "You were fond of her?"

Lew shrugged. He said, "I want to be let alone. If I'm dry-gulched, you know what'll happen. The U. S. Government will have troops up here, which they should have had long ago, to keep order."

Carter said, "I run this country, Tolliver. We don't need troops!" He was getting angry, now, but Lew saw his advantage and pressed it.

"All right, sir! If you don't want 'em—see that nobody pumps lead into my back!"

HE got up, then, knowing enough to leave them thinking over the idea he had planted. He fired one parting shot:

"Joe Main wrote his sister that he would have had a good claim, only some corporation jumped it and hornswoggled him. I got to look into that—you might help me, Carter."

The big man didn't flinch. "Joe Main got drunk and sold his claim to Gold, Incorporated, for a thousand dollars, which he promptly lost to Diamond Dave Dane, over the faro tables. If that's what you want to know."

Lew said, "That's straight talk, anyway. Good-night!"

Fay's smile was mechanical, but her eyes seemed somber, staring at him as he went past her. In the bar, Musky was very drunk and Lew had to get an arm around him to tote him to their cabin. Diamond Dave nodded to him in friendly fashion and the barkeep held the door while they staggered out.

The memory of Fay's eyes, the undercurrent he felt when he was near her, disturbed Lew all the way to the side-street upon which they lived. He got Musky into the bunk and let him lay, fully clothed. The stove was colder than a polar bear's ear, and Lew shivered, starting a fire.

Well, he was in the open. He was an officer and Carter had guessed it, and that was all right, too. Joe Main had been swindled, short-carded and murdered in one day, and before he was through Lew meant to know about that, every detail—and he meant to learn [illegible] other things, too.

But he had plenty of time, and Elsie was entitled to her chance for security. Joe had loved his sister. Joe had meant to take care of her. If Musky could find gold, Lew could make up to the girl what Joe had failed to provide. Joe had been his bunkie since they were buttons—reckless, happy-go-lucky, restless Joe Main, the freckled kid.

Lew had been up on the bleakness of Thundercloud's Boot Hill and had paused a while by the grave of Joe main. Lew was far from sentimental, but it didn't seem right for a Texas boy to be sleeping in such hard, cold ground. . . .

The stove glowed like a cherry in the darkness and Lew hunched closer, thinking of Joe Main and Elsie. . . .

BACK in the Aurora, Fay Fancher was saying, "We were right. He's a Federal Deputy."

"If he got into Gold Incorporated, there would be the end of things," said Carter. He was not afraid, he was considering the situation. "We're skating on thin ice with

our monopoly. . . . He's an attractive Texan, Fay."

"So was Joe Main," sighed Fay. "These Texans. . . ."

"Main was a fool!" said Carter. "This man is not!"

"I know," said Fay softly. "He's tough, and quick. That b'g gun—it seems to grow out of his hand!"

Morgan Carter's eyes lighted. He was happy, almost boyish in his excitement. "The trail! A southerner can't stand too much ice and snow! How about Musky, Fay?"

She shook her head. "Musky is dead honest."

"Well—we must fool Musky, even. Get them started before the spring break! Get them out of Thundercloud and send Brown and Gandy after them—to make sure things happen that will finish them on the trail!"

Fay leaned back, where the gleam of the lamp could not reach her face. She said, "Morgan, you're the coldest-blooded proposition I've ever seen. And the smartest!"

He sobered, the elation dying within him. "I've started, and I can't go back. I said I'd quit at a million. I've got the million—you know that. But what would I do if I went home? How could I live like other men? I've conquered the North, Fay—everything in it but you! But, by the same turn, the North has got me, like it gets all of them. New York, Washington—*pah!* I came home two weeks early last time I went out. . . ."

She said, "It hasn't got me, Morgan! When you can arrange it, I still want out!"

His face pinched up, just for a moment, but she saw the devil leering through. It was one of those rare instants when Morgan Carter lost control—they almost never happened in Fay's presence, but she was aware of them. He said slowly:

"Jackson is working on the books, Fay. You shall have your full share, never fear."

But, of course, the bookkeeper never would finish. Morgan would stall her, for a month, for a year. He never gave up. He wanted her and he was going to have her, sooner or later, on his terms. She felt the tremendous power of the man even as she sat there hating him. . . .

"It will have to be a good story," he was murmuring. "Musky is smart . . . but he trusts some of the oldtimers who will do as I say . . . who must do what I tell them. . . ."

Oh, yes, it would be a fine tale! Morgan would cook it up, then Musky would fall for it, and the Texan would go out before it was safe. Then the two thugs, Brown and Gandy, would kill some dogs, or steal some precious food, or perform some other trick, and there would be two more frozen bodies for the real thaw to disclose as victims of the raw and frozen north. . . .

Fay's eyes glowed and died and glowed again. She had a million dollars of her own tied up in Gold Incorporated, and the Aurora Palace. She had the most tremendous stake of any woman in the land. Back in Texas a girl named Elsie Main waited for this pale-eyed, drawling Texan to bring news of her dead brother. Fay shivered—she had talked to Joe not fifteen minutes before they picked up his body on Main Street.

She sat, listening to Morgan Carter's high-pressure mind speed over his plans. Her fingernails bit into her palms, so that later she discovered four red marks on each hand. . . .

III

MORGAN Carter paid well for services rendered. His operations in the mines worked short-handed, speeded-up, but the remuneration was great. The result was that he employed the toughest bullies in the northwest. They were all loyal to him for giving them big pay. They all respected his ability to take care of himself.

Musky, sobered for the conditioning process, had an eye on some dogs belonging to a miner, so Lew Tolliver accompanied his friend to one of the Gold Incorporated diggings that morning. All Lew knew about dogs was that they did not make good cattle-herders, although they were all right for sheep. The malemutes almost scared him to death by snapping at his gun hand as though they had never been fed. But he was very interested in Gold Incorporated and all its works, so he wandered among the cabins, eyeing the hardy, walrus-hided men, the machinery, the mill which ran right along, winter and summer.

Morgan Carter came striding from a shanty which seemed to be an office.

He called, "Hi, Tolliver!"

A miner came from a cabin. It was Mose Brown, his jaw apparently recovered from the kick delivered so deftly by Musky. Mose wore a beard over it now, and he seemed angry about something. He shouted at Morgan Carter, "I want my pay! I got to go outside and see my family, I tell ya!"

Carter stopped and said, "I need you, Mose."

"Damn you, I'll *have* my pay!" howled Brown. He was close to Carter, now, towering over him. Lew's eyes narrowed. Brown meant business. Lew knew an irate man when he saw one, that being his business.

Carter said, "Back away, Mose. I told you all I had to say. Back off!"

Brown's answer was a quick poke at Carter's head, a lunging swing following the lead. It was quick work, and should have surprised the other.

Lew started forward, stopped. It was none of his business. He watched as Carter went back from the punches, reeling, slipping in the snow. Brown moved ahead, his eyes fiery with rage, throwing blows like the kicks of mules. Carter covered, ducked, sidestepped. Then he went to work.

The man was chain lightning with his fists. He hit Brown three times with chopping, meat-cleaver rights. Each landed on the big man's face. Brown staggered. Carter went after him, battering away with lethal short punches. Lew had never seen a man hit so hard with so little effort. Brown flopped, suddenly, on his face.

Carter stepped back. He said in a voice as cold as the frigid air, "Now you can go —and you owe me that pay at the commissary! Figure that one out!"

Brown's mouth dripped blood. He had cowered in fear of the boots, but Carter spared him that. He crept a few yards on his hands and knees. He got up, then, staring at his boss. He said, "All right, you beat me. But I'll get you. I'll make plow-line of your guts some day!" He went on into the cabin he had just quitted and Handy Gandy's voice came out to Lew.

"Ugh! Yuh damn fool! He kin lick any man in the North and you got to start up with him!"

Brown cursed him savagely.

Carter was smiling, his mood changed completely. He said, "Take a look around, Tolliver! Can I show you anything? I own an interest in these diggings, you know!"

"Do you?" asked Lew noncommitally. "Well; We just came up to buy some dogs. Musky wants time to train 'em. Musky says there's gonna be a big storm."

"No!" said Carter decisively. "No storm! I'll guarantee that. Spring is just around that corner, Tolliver!"

"Hope so," drawled Lew. "I'm dog-gone tired of snow. And more snow. Say—where are the independent mines, here on Thundercloud?"

Carter's eyes retreated into his head. He said softly, "You're interested in small operations?"

"Well, naturally," said Lew, grinning. Musky and me don't figure to tote machinery where we're goin'. Musky's got a place—course I can't tell you."

Carter said, "That's right, you can't. He laughed, then he said confidentially, "You know, Musky has a new one every spring! Quite a character, Musky!"

"Yeah," said Lew. He frowned. You mean he hasn't really got a good, secret gold mine?"

Carter's eyebrows went up. "Who's paying for the dogs?"

"Why—that's my part," said Lew confusedly. "I'm a tenderfoot chechako—got to do my share. . . ."

Carter said, "You'll learn, Lew! Come and see me when you get back. I'd like to hear how you make out—and I may have some news about Joe Main."

As unruffled as though his afray with Brown had been a bit of horseplay, the big man nodded and went back to the office. Lew caught a glimpse of the old man, Jackson, hunched over a desk, his thin legs caught in the rungs of a highstool. Gold Incorporated evidently had no elaborate staff of office help, despite its wealth.

Somewhere among the claims was Joe Main's rich holding. No doubt, Morgan Carter had a bill of sale, duly executed, for the property. Lew's jaw hardened. The racket was perfect. Sell them liquor, get them drunk, take their money away at Diamond Dave's crooked gaming tables. There wasn't anything anyone could do about it, except the U. S. Government, which hadn't

at any time taken much interest in the governing of Alaska.

LEW rejoined Musky. The dogs, growling and scrapping among themselves, were hitched to the sled, and Musky seemed quite happy, and Lew's money went to the miner. They started back toward town. Musky said, above the rising wind:

"Best team of huskies in the country. Carter gave Simpson a good job, and he won't need 'em. They'll take us to Thunder Mountain."

Lew held to the bar, making time as best he could alongside the sled. He said, "Musky, what about Thunder Mountain? Have you really got a claim pegged up there?"

Musky rolled his eyes, then cracked a whip over the ears of the malemutes and grinned. He said frankly, "There's gold on Thunder. Maybe I haven't got it exactly located, but we'll find it."

Lew said, "Sure! We'll find it." But his heart sank.

Morgan Carter hadn't lied. Musky didn't have a cache—he had a dream. Lew's time and money were going for a wild-goose chase into the frozen snowy mountains of the Yukon.

They came into Thundercloud and put up the dogs with a friend of Musky's, another old sourdough named Hightower, who was married and worked for Gold Incorporated. Musky explained to Lew that they would now begin trial runs each day, lengthening the distance as they hardened to the trail. Musky had a system, he said, which made him fit for any circumstance which might arise. It was like training for a prize fight, he averred.

"I thought we weren't goin' out until it was safe," said Lew. "You always said a man was a fool to take chances."

Musky said evasively, "Well, old Highwater was just tellin' me something about Thunder . . . and Simpson seemed to think Carter was interested in the country. You haven't mentioned Thunder Mountain to anybody, have you?"

"No!" said Lew. "Of course, not!"

"Well, I don't like the talk," said Musky, frowning. "We may have to beat the spring break-up a leetle bit—to stay ahead of anyone goes out."

Lew said nothing, but that night in the Aurora he listened to Fay Fancher's unbeautiful singing voice, with his whiskey untouched. And when he did empty the glass, under cover of the applause which Fay undeservedly rated from her many friends, it was onto the floor at his side. Then he went into Fay's private room and sat and listened to her—it was funny the way she had become the spiller of talk and Lew the listener.

She said restlessly, "I'm sick of it, Lew. It's ruining me. I don't even hear them anymore. My ears are bent over from listening. I know the life story of every man in Thundercloud. I know everything that goes on, or that might happen in the future."

Lew said lightly, "You haven't heard of anyone planning to slip out early, have you, Fay?"

Her eyes glazed for a moment, then turned on him and held him. She started to speak, moistened her lips, stopped. She got up and moved to the door, opened it, looked into the hall. She went to the window of the room and peered out. She came back and sat close to Lew and whispered:

"No! I haven't, and no one is heading for Thunder Mountain! I'm telling the truth, Lew, though God knows why. I'm a fool, Lew, to tell you this, and if you quoted me, I'd be killed before morning. You know that, don't you?"

Lew said, "Yes. I know."

SHE was started now, and the words rushed from her. "I've bought old Jackson, the bookkeeper. I'm getting a statement from him, of my holdings. I'm going to gather what resources I can—sacrifice what I must. I'm going outside, Lew. I'm going back to the States and live!"

Lew said, "You sure, Fay?"

"I'm getting away from Morgan," she said.

Lew said, "You wouldn't string a fella, would you, Fay?"

"You don't believe me!" she said. "You think I'm framing you! You've thought it all along. . . ."

Lew arose. He said, "I'm not judgin' you, Fay. I don't hold myself fit to judge you. I'm lookin' for the murderer of Joe Main—and I'm lookin' for gold for Elsie

Main. Anything that gets in my way is liable to get moved—out. You can tell that to Carter."

"I'm not telling him anything!" she cried. "I'm through. I want out, Lew! I was going to ask you to help!"

Lew's blue eyes were frosty. He said, "I got some work to do, Fay. You're mighty sweet, somehow. But Joe Main's sleepin' in a cold bed and Elsie needs the money he never got for her. I'll be seein' you, Fay."

At the cabin there was light and talk within. Lew waited a moment, heard Musky's accents, excited, questioning. He pushed open the door and at the fireside sat Mose Brown, his face battered lop-sided, his close-set eyes baleful.

Musky said, "Carter's sendin' Handy Gandy and Brown up to Thunder Mountain. He paid Mose, but insisted he had to make the trek to Thunder before he could go outside and see his ailin' mother. Lew, are you sure you didn't let anything slip to Fay about Thunder?"

Lew said, "Yes. What's the answer, Musky?"

"We go out tomorrow!" said Musky. "Lew, I was lyin' about the way the gold lays around up there. But I tell you the traces were terrific! Hard work this summer will make us both rich. There's a stream runnin' down. . . ." He stopped, his face flushed, staring at Mose. He said softly, "I'll deal you and Gandy in. There's plenty—I'm no monopolist, like Carter. Will that satisfy Gandy, Mose?"

The big man growled, "Gandy's a Carter man to his heart. But let us get there—I'll throw in with you. You seen what Carter did to me for jest askin' for my money. If I got to kill Handy—I'll do it! I want out of Morgan Carter's hands!"

The second time that night, thought Lew, that a Carter adherent was crying quits. Maybe the big man of the Thunder country was slipping. Maybe he was using the mailed fist too heavily. Maybe it was true that the higher they fly the harder they fall.

Mose Brown went out, and Musky was solemn. Musky said, "Hightower and Simpson are oldtimers. They work for Carter, but I knew 'em twenty years ago. Now Mose comes in and spills it. We ain't ready, Lew, but we got to go—tomorrow."

Lew said, "I'm ready."

"You're not," gloomed Musky, "and neither am I. But if the storm holds off—or if we can outrun it with the dogs we bought—I'd leave tonight if I could!"

That was the first time Lew saw the real gold fever arise in a man. He had known Musky as a tough whiskey drinker, a sharp-tongued, cynical barfly with a saving hardness and dignity—now he saw him keen eyed, hungry-looking but not for food, all motion, unable to sit still in the warm room. Outside the wind whistled a little, not ominously, but sharply. Lew knew nothing about weather in the North—and Musky was beyond caring. Musky wanted to get to Thunder Mountain and the gold he believed was there. . . .

IV

THEY could travel light until they got over the Pass and into Klatwah, Musky said grimly. That post would provide them with a complete outfit, and they could toughen up by toting it short distance, enroute to Thunder Mountain. A ton of provisions per man, he said, was the minimum. They would portage it in relays, as much as they could carry, making only five-mile jumps at first—working up to the customary ten miles. It sounded like hard work to Lew, but he nodded, impatient now to get going.

Gold-fever, it seemed, like whooping cough, was catching. Musky's excitement and fear of being beaten on the trail had communicated itself to Lew. Fay Fancher's statement that no one was going out to Thunder was disregarded, and only occasionally did a small doubt arise in the back of his mind, implanted by the seriousness of Fay's words and demeanor.

They went out early, the dogs leaping along, the darkness relieved only by the Northern Lights in their crazy dance against the banked dullness of the polar sky. It was, Musky said, almost time for the spring break, anyway. It would be early—already there were reports of booming ice on the River despite the clinging of the thermometer to its nether end. The sled was lashed under light canvas, and all seemed shipshape. As the light increased

almost imperceptibly Musky cursed under his breath. A thin, moving mist or fog with edges tinted by a somnolent sun moved on the horizon.

"Patch storm!" said Musky. "We got to outrun it. I wish the last two week's whiskey was outa me! I wish that damned Carter would stay in his own diggin's and leave me to mine!"

Lew saved his breath, refusing to comment. He was lean and hard from days in the saddle, his muscles were like wh pcord, but he was not a musher and the frozen country was strange to him and he was remembering the words of Fay Fancher again. . . .

FAY FANCHER had not slept well, that night. At two in the morning she arose and dressed warmly, donning a buffalo coat which swept the ground. She went out into the street, now deserted, and her going was shadowy, furtive. She reached a house on a side-alley and tapped on a window. For a moment there was no response, then a quavering voice said, "Is it you, [illegible]

[illegible]irry!" she said. "I want to know things."

Old Jackson crawled from his sleeping bag and let her into the smelly, warm cabin. She said, "How much have I coming, so far as you know?"

The old man snivelled, "I haven't had the time to finish. . . ."

Fay's voice dropped, became hard as flint. "Don't try to double-cross me, Jackson! How much to date?"

Jackson said weakly, "Morgan owes you at least two hundred thousand dollars, Fay. At least. . . ."

"Twice that!" said Fay. "Can you get your hands on cash and bank drafts to that amount? Tomorrow—this week?"

"That would be stealing!" said Jackson desperately.

"I've paid you," she said scornfully. "I'll pay you five per cent of what you can sneak out of my money. You can get back to the States—where you want to go. Morgan can't touch you, then. Will you do it?"

Jackson's hand trembled, stroking his short, white beard. He looked exactly like an old goat, Fay thought. He said:

"I'll do it. I want to get away. Morgan pays everyone well, except me. He's always taken advantage of me, because I can't fight back. I'll do it, Fay. As soon as I can."

Fay said, "Good! I'm counting on it. . . ."

She went out into the dark early morning air. She saw the man stagger past Jackson's house, but she did not see the man cease acting like a drunk when he was out of sight, did not see the knife which flashed in the crouching figure's hand. She never heard the gurgle which indicated that old Jackson was lying in the sleeping bag with a gaping wound in his throat and blood escaping—not much blood, for Jackson was old and weak, but enough to forever stain the sleeping bag. . . .

But in the morning she knew. Everyone knew then. She listened, with horror, to her informant. She knew why Jackson was murdered. She began to suspect other things, and to fear further developments. In that hour there also came news of the departure of Lew Tolliver and Musky Rathbone.

Then Hightower came into the Aurora and mentioned that Mose Brown and Handy Gandy were going out—and that Morgan Carter was readying an outfit, too, in case anything good came out of Thunder. Morgan was never more than a step behind, said the oldtimer reverently. Tolliver and Musky better sit tight if they do find anything worth while. . . .

Fay began to get panicked, then. Diamond Dave never let her get out of his sight. A couple of gamblers and the barkeep were somewhere near, no matter how or where she moved.

Morgan Carter came in about noon. His handsome face was satisfied, his eyes were serene, as though he had just enjoyed a good meal and a fine cigar. He purred at her, "Change your mind and marry me. If you don't love me, marry me for the profit alone! We'll rule the country, I tell you!"

Fay made herself laugh. She said, "I hear you've got dogs and are going out again."

"You hear everything," said Morgan. "You haven't heard who killed my bookkeeper yet, have you?"

Fay said, "Poor old Jackson!"

Carter's voice slowed, became ominous, then vicious, "I'm glad to be shut of him. He was sticking his nose into things—asking questions. He was an old fool. Anyone who tries to buck me is a fool, Fay!"

"Yes," she said. "We know that, *don't we?*"

He left soon after that. Brown and Gandy were gone, the report come. Morgan was up at the mines. . . . Fay found fur pantaloons, mukluks, heavy stockings, her beloved beaver parka. Scarcely realizing what she was doing, she went through the streets again, to the stable where Morgan Carter's dogs were kept. She saw the reddish matched team, the finest huskies money could buy, not excepting Musky's team. The trainer said, "Morgan is gonna enter these in the Sweepstakes. Some dawgs!"

She said she would take them out for a run. The man looked skeptical, but hitched them to the sled. Fay went down to Charlie's store and bought some things—not too much. She would catch Musky and Lew at Klatwah. . . . She must! She bought a rifle, and Charlie looked suspicious, but she laughed and said she was afraid of wolves even within five miles of town. She could have added that she was afraid of a wolf within Thundercloud—terribly afraid, when she thought of Old Jackson lying in his sleeping bag, cold and stiff, as the cabin's fire died and discovery awaited, and of Morgan Carter's knowledge that Jackson was prying into the secret account books.

Joe Main had died after doing business with Morgan. Just before his death, Joe had said to Fay that something was wrong with the Carter set-up and he meant to know what.

Brown and Gandy were following Musky and Lew. She strapped the rifle to the sled, but was careful to see that it was loaded. It was a new Winchester .44, and she knew how to use it. She had been on the trail before. . . .

She was out of town before she knew it, riding the bar, her champion dogs going like thoroughbreds. She set her course to the Pass and hoped that she could be in time for what she knew must happen there in the frozen wasteland.

THE two men were almost to the shelter of the ice cliffs that rimmed the Pass. Musky was laboring a little—the whiskey was counting against him. Lew felt no terrible weariness, but he knew they had been traveling. The patch wind came down over the ice and, as ill luck would have it, struck at them broadside.

Dogs, sled and men could not withstand that blast from the north. It jammed them up against the cliffs, pinning them, taking away their breaths, showing off its might. They could not move, and then Musky groaned as the wet snowflakes drifted in the wake of the wind.

It was a blizzard, although the temperature was rising. It was winter's last fling before the spring came, and it would be a bitter one. Musky said, "Got to run it out. Got to make a cabin—anything. Then go back to Thundercloud when we can get through. We'll never make it, now! Not until the blizzard's over!"

There was no lull for long hours. The cliffs provided shelter of a sort, and Musky got the dog harness straightened out, quieted the huskies, furnished them each with fur flank protectors and pav[illegible] casins for foothold. Musky a[illegible] them to the tow-line, took one end of a long rawhide and said:

"I'll lead 'em. There used to be a cabin down here belonged to Morgan Carter—a sort of an outpost. Might even be food and fuel in it. If I can find it, we'll be all right."

Lew nodded. He was aware now that if Musky didn't find it, they would freeze to death under a bank of snow. The blizzard was gaining strength, the dogs floundered through drifts. But they went on, these fierce half-wild malemutes, so that Lew grew fascinated by their prowess. He clung to the bar, his parka pulled to protect him as much as possible from the wind, and slowly they made progress.

There was no pause through that night. Lew's muscles cramped, then ached, but he knew Musky suffered worse than he. The peril of sleep was well known to him without Musky's admonitions. Somehow he remained upright, moving his legs, keeping along with the dogs. It was sheer torture, but in it was some elemental satisfaction that they could keep going, and in Lew's soul defiance grew.

He would not be beaten by a pre-spring blizzard. He would not die in this strange northland with his work undone.

He stuck it out, and when Musky halted, he went forward in the snow and looked at the haggard face of his partner and said, "If you'll give me an idea what to look for, I'll take the lead and you ride the bar."

Musky growled a little in his throat, then said, "You're a game chechako—but you belong back yonder. This is my deal. If I can stay on my feet, I'll find that damned cabin. . . ."

It was desperate going. Lew found his feet numb, both from the cold and the travail. He clung with his furred gloves to the sled, lowering his head a little, setting his jaw. His blue eyes were as hard as the ice below the newly-fallen snow.

Musky began staggering, the course of their journey wavered. It all depended upon Musky, Lew knew. If the sourdough could not make it, a chechako didn't have a chance.

Musky went down on his knees. Lew took a deep breath. This was it, he supposed. The dogs were whining, their tails down, the leader nuzzling at Musky. Lew pried himself loose from the sled and went stumbling ahead. Musky put out a wet, limp mitten and pointed. He said, gasping, "Gimme a lift. I think—I'm pretty sure. . . . Help me, Lew!"

Lew reached down and hauled his partner to his feet. Musky swayed, leaned heavily against the Texan. He said in strangely muted accents, "Straight ahead. A dark shape. . . . Am I imaginin' it, Lew?"

Lew again saved his breath. He took the rawhide line from Musky's hand. He led the older man back to the sled, forced him down, pulled the buffalo robe over him. He went back and the dogs growled a little, but followed his lead. He trudged ahead, his swollen eyes upon the shadow which Musky had indicated.

It seemed a hundred miles, in that wind which never ceased to hamper him. The dogs were slowed down by the added weight of Musky. Lew slogged on. The shape became larger in the dimness. It took outlines. It became a blessed roof, walls, a window. It was Morgan Carter's outpost cabin!

The dogs leaped, tired as they were. There was a shed that was out of the wind. Lew picked Musky from the sled and bore him to the cabin. The door opened readily enough. There was a rusty iron stove, some piled firewood. Shelves held simple supplies—not much, but enough! Lew put Musky upon the bunk and reached with clumsy hands for a stick of wood. They were saved—and Musky had pulled it through. With unerring instinct, he had driven through the blizzard to the spot he remembered. Ignorant as he was, Lew was aware that not one man in a thousand could have done it. . . .

He put on the coffee at once. Musky was sleeping now, but the terrible lines were gone from his face. Musky would be all right, and they would live to get out of this mess, Lew thought triumphantly.

The coffee was boiling when the dogs set up a great howling and Lew stepped out to see what ailed them. There were other dogs, he saw at once. There was another sled!

Lew said instantly, "Mose! Is that you?"

From behind him, between him and the cabin, Mose Brown's voice said, "Yep! And get your hands up, Tolliver! Gandy and me have got you covered!"

Lew willingly raised his arms. Mose was carrying it out for awhile, he figured. It would be necessary to get Gandy into the middle before he could be either bought off or—killed. Well, it wasn't so bad. There were a few provisions in the sled, of course, and the two Carter men would have some. This confounded blizzard. . . . He turned at Mose's command and walked back to the cabin.

The lamp was smoking when he entered and he stepped to adjust it. Mose said sharply, "None of that!"

Lew turned. Musky slept like a drugged man. Brown and Gandy, bulky in their furs, stood surveying him. Moose jeered, "There's the tough gun-fighter from Texas—the smart lawman. My little boxin' match with Morgan fooled him plenty!"

Gandy said, "Get their supplies and get outa here. This storm ain't no fun! Get movin', Mose!"

"Just because I got me some bruises foolin' with Morgan, I'm a sell-out," chortled Mose. "Tryin' to buck the *real* men of the North, huh, Texan? Hope you like it here! Ha!"

Gandy was sweeping the precious food from the shelves. It was all too apparent what they meant to do. Carter had planned that fight with Brown. They couldn't murder an officer outright for fear of U. S. Government reprisals—Carter had taken that warning to heart. But they could leave him to die of starvation in a cold and foodless cabin in the Pass—and no one the wiser!

Lew balanced on the balls of his feet. He wore too many layers of clothing for the swift action he needed. He knew one thing, very clearly. Quick death by bullet was better than slow starvation. His mind was very clear and very agile. He weighed his chances while Musky slept in a deep stupor and the fire died a little in the stove and a chill came on the one room of tne cabin. . . .

V

THE storm caught Fay Fancher before she was ten miles out of Thundercloud. The huskies whined and fought bravely and Fay clung to the sled as the vagrant wind tossed her in savage play. For a moment she was ready to quit, to let the dogs run, to give up. Ahead somewhere was the Texan who affected her so strangely and who she must warn against Mose Brown and Gandy. But it seemed that even Nature conspired to keep her from doing so . . . and for a moment it did not seem worth the effort to fight.

The dogs were gallant, the sled remained upright by a miracle. They went on, struggling through the drifts. Fay regained some strength, dismounted. The wind tore at her with violence, but she got hold on the bar and made her feet move. She was lighter than she seemed, and the pretty legs within the fur pantaloons were strong. She was forging through—whence she did not know, but onward, with all her strength and courage, and with faith that somewhere Lew Tolliver and his blue eyes and his ready gun would protect her from Morgan Carter.

She came to the lee of a hillock and for a moment the wind did not tear her breath from her before she could use it, so she stopped. The dogs lay panting while she pried little ice cubes from between their pads. They lapped at her even as they growled, and she knew Morgan Carter had indeed bought Sweepstakes' contenders in these huskies.

She knew also that delay was dangerous, that she must either turn back or go ahead. It was out of the question to make Klatwah now. If the swift dogs could overtake Musky's team—but Lew and Musky had a long start upon her, and Brown and Gandy were between. She bit her cold lips, burying her face in the fur of the parka, studying a plan of action.

Morgan Carter would go through Jackson's effects. He would learn that certain figures applied to Fay's holdings, and he would know that it was she who inspired Jackson's snooping. Morgan Carter would have her then. He could frighten her into anything. She admitted it, kneeling in the lee of the hillock of ice and snow. She was afraid of him—she had always been afraid of him. He personified the ruggedness and strength of the North, and although Fay had made her fortune, she had not wrung it easily from the country. She knew fear. . . .

She must go on. Return would mean coercion into marriage, or something worse, with Morgan Carter. She knew the evil in him—she had seen it more than once. Joe Main, now old Jackson, had died violently. Fay asked herself if she was afraid of death, too, and the answer seemed to be that she was frightened only of Morgan Carter.

She arose and spoke to the lead dog. The game beasts lined up, ready to go. She mounted the bar and chirruped. The tow-line stretched . . . and a figure on snowshoes came gliding into the comparative quiet of the shaded spot and said, "Turn them around, Fay!"

She stared, and there was no mistaking the rugged, swelling outlines of Morgan Carter. She could only see a part of his face, but the eyes blazed at her. He stood motionless, his arm pointing back toward Thundercloud.

She cried, in frantic screaming, "No! I won't! *I won't, I tell you!*"

He strode and caught at her, and then she fainted, and when he put her on the sled she was mercifully unconscious. She was between waking and sleeping all the way back to town, in a sort of delirium of fear—for herself and for Lew Tolliver, for she knew that Carter would not return to Thundercloud unless Lew's fate was sealed. She was in a hideous nightmare, and it was necessary for Carter to lift and carry her into the rear of the Aurora Palace, where he locked the door of her own room upon her while he went about his business. But before he left he said,

"I know what you meant to do, Fay. I'll be back. Brown and Gandy should be here by then. We'll know that Tolliver is gone—without a trace. You'll do as I say, Fay, or I'll turn you over to Brown and Gandy as a reward for their work. I mean that, Fay!"

She sat, in a stupor, remembering his face when he said that to her, his iron-featured face with its cold malignance. She had never thought him completely evil, she had only believed that he was hard, with flashes of the devil in him. Now she knew better. Now she knew exactly what to expect. . . .

And Lew was gone. They would take good care of that, Brown and Gandy, skulking from ambush. There was no hope . . . none at all.

Nevertheless she hoped, sitting there staring at the locked door, knowing that on the other side were Diamond Dave Dane and a score of others to prevent her escape. . . .

GANDY had a sack, into which he was sweeping the provisions. They were going to be very careful not to leave evidence. They were going to make sure that it was starvation due to the storm and miscalculation. The dogs—they, too, would starve in the blizzard. Musky, too, who lay so still and even snored gently, sleeping off his exhaustion. Brown held the .45 trained upon Lew.

The wood in the little chunk stove crackled, a warming, heartening sound, although it would need another stick very soon. Brown could not seem to keep his mouth shut. He said:

"The damned woman, too. She'll get hers today! Morgan is wise to you and the woman! When we get back, she'll be duck soup to Morgan. You can't beat him, Texan! He's the biggest, smartest man north of Forty-Four!"

Gandy was edging around with the sack, which was bulky and unwieldy. Lew's gun was beneath four layers of clothing. The rifle was under the canvas of the sled. There wasn't a chance in the world, not with Musky lying there so oblivious.

Gandy took one more step, and was close to the table upon which rested the still smoking lamp. The chimney was blackened, now, and getting worse. The light was getting bad.

The cabin was not large, with all these big men within its confines. Gandy had to be careful to stay out of the line of Brown's gun, so that Lew could be kept under cover of it. He flattened himself between table and wall, turning away from Lew as he inched through the narrow space.

The lamp was a hazard. Lew counted to himself. Gandy was halfway through. Brown was saying something in his loud voice.

Lew jumped, went for the table. He caught at the edge as he heard the curse, the roar of Brown's weapon. He thrust the table against Gandy, upsetting the lamp.

The lamp could explode, could set the cabin affre, but it went out in a single guttering sputter. Again Brown's gun crashed in the darkness, then Gandy was howling:

"You ain't supposed to shoot him, you jackass!" and Gandy couldn't move as Lew lunged and went flying around the table. Brown did not fire again. Then Lew's hands closed on Gandy.

The man came loose from behind the table. Lew smashed at his wrist, the bag of provisions went flying.

Brown came lumbering in. Lew grunted, bending over, hanging onto Gandy's wrist. He found his leverage. He got the big man on his hip and threw his weight into a flying mare. Gandy went up and over and howled as he twisted through the air. Brown, coming in to grab at Lew, met the impact of Gandy's body and both went down to the floor.

Musky cried hoarsely, "What the hell?" and Lew laughed.

Then Lew was jumping in again, both fists working. He struck a beard—that would be Brown. He got in a good wallop on a mouth which had no teeth in the front and knew it was Gandy. They flopped over each other while he harried them, his eyes growing accustomed to the dimness and the slight glow of the stove. Each time one of them tried to arise, his cat-like swiftness felled them again.

Musky was up, staggering a little. His shaking hands found the lamp, and in a moment its cracked globe was giving off enough radiance to show him the situation. Gandy and Brown made a concerted effort, trying to come off the floor together, clutching at Lew's knees.

Musky picked up a piece of the cordwood in the corner. He stepped around the table and used it twice. The dull thud of the skull blows was a pleasant sound to Lew's ears. The two ruffians lopped over each other in ridiculous slumber.

Musky said, "I musta slept pretty good!"

"Yeah!" said Lew. "But you woke up—Musky, we got to get back to town."

Musky said, "We got to go *tonight?*"

Lew nodded. "Brown talked. Carter is after Fay Fancher. They meant to maroon us here without food or fuel while he took care of Fay."

Musky looked regretfully at the bunk he had just quitted. "I could use another day's sleep! Well—we'll take their snowshoes and leave 'em the provisions, and then those two will be here when we want 'em. You do want 'em, don't you?" Musky gazed shrewdly at Lew. "You're some kind of officer, ain't you?"

Lew said, "Yeah. I'm the kind that goes after Morgan Carter and Gold Incorporated."

"Thought so!" said Musky satisfiedly. "Well—it's a longish jaunt . . . but let's go to Thundercloud. That gold can wait until you get your job done. . . ."

VI

MORGAN Carter re-entered the back room of the Aurora Palace. Fay did not look up from her despondency. The big man was wearing his pea-jacket and white hat and there was a sleekness about him, now. He said, "You and your Texan. And Jackson, meddling with my books. You think I don't know everything that goes on? I own this country, Fay! Never forget that!"

He went on and on, but her ears were for the lumbering feet of Brown and Gandy, returning to tell of the finish of Lew Tolliver. Not that it could ever have meant anything to Fay if Lew had lived—there was always Joe Main's sister Elsie. Lew had given his life to get gold for Elsie, Fay knew.

Joe Main! He had said, that last night, in this very room where men talked, "I'm learnin' a thing or two about this Morgan Carter and Gold Incorporated. I've got a pal down home that could come up here and straighten out this big Morgan Carter! I'm not so tough, I guess. I get drunk. My pal never gets really drunk. He can hold too much. . . ."

There was a panel in the wall, over next to the hall. Through it Morgan's men could hear what went on in the room where Fay Fancher listened to men's tales of woe or fortune. That night—Morgan himself had been around that night. Fay's head came up. There were sounds in the hall. . . .

Joe Main had been showing her a snapshot of his sister, Elsie . . . a pretty woman, older than Joe. . . . Morgan had emptied Joe's pocketbook of all but the snapshot—or rather Diamond Dave had seen to that. Joe had been pretty desperate, but Fay had not believed any harm would come to the good-natured Texan, now broke. . . . And then they had picked Joe up with a bullet in him, and something had snapped in easy-going Fay Fancher, and that had been the beginning of her desire to get away.

The footsteps in the hall came nearer and Morgan said, "You'd better be making up your mind. You come to my house, with me, right from here—or Brown and Gandy can have you, for all of me. I won't stand for treachery, Fay! I wanted to marry you, but you crossed me. . . ."

The door banged open. The two men came in. Morgan Carter was not speaking; she heard his breath hiss in a small explosion, like escaping steam.

She looked up, her pale face gaunt in the subdued light of the lamp. Musky was leaning with his back against the door, very sleepy-eyed. At Musky's belt were a pair of revolvers. In his hand was a dangerous sawed-off shotgun.

Lew Tolliver was speaking softly. "Somehow your men didn't seem anxious to go against this badge and the shotgun. So we walked right in, Morgan."

On his close-fitting navy blue shirt was a bright star, and he was dressed in soft, high-heeled boots. He had discarded all the heavy clothing, and his gun was swinging at his lean flank. He had brown, clever hands, thought Fay. . . .

She said quietly, but urgently, "The panel in the right wall! Musky!"

Diamond Dave's evil face thrust through as the panel slid back. Musky swung the shotgun and there was a thunderous roar, and then there was no more Diamond Dave. But that gave Morgan Carter the split second he wanted. . . .

His gun was up his sleeve, a derringer, deadly enough at that range and instantly come by, merely through the shake of his wrist. The ugly little gun seemed to appear by magic, blazing away at Lew. Fay flew from her chair, a vague idea of stopping the lead, keeping it from Lew's lean body, sending her onward.

But Lew's brown hand had moved. It swivelled down, it leaped up. The long-barrelled .44 with its gleaming blue sheen spoke like a warning, barking bulldog. It spat once, twice. Plaster fell from the wall. Lew turned sideways, and there was a spot of color on his left sleeve. He glanced down at it, then at Morgan Carter.

THE big man was leaning against the wall, at an awkward angle. His face was dark, his hands fumbled at his middle.

He smiled, and his eyes were full of hatred for Lew, for the fate which had downed him, but there was something magnificently reckless in the smile, as though he had seen through to another land, another chance. . . . He died on his feet, leaning against the wall, then slowly slid to a heap, his white hat still firmly set upon his head as it always had been.

Lew, his jaw set, searched the body. There were things he would have to report—he could overlook nothing. He pulled forth a clutter of papers from a capacious pocket inside the pea jacket. There was a knife in a sheath slung between the shoulder blades of the corpse. . . .

A flat wallet spread upon the table, and Lew's hand touched it, once. He said, "Joe's cowhide pocketbook. There used to be a picture of Elsie in it. . . ."

Fay wrung her white fingers together. She reached for her own bag, opened it, took out the snapshot. She said, "I had Jackson steal it—after you came. It was in Morgan's safe—why he kept it, I don't know." She handed it over. Her face worked strangely as Lew picked it up, stared at it. She said, "I guess you'll be going back to her. I hope you get your gold for her. I hope you'll be very happy. . . ."

Lew looked puzzled. He said, "Yeah. I aim to go back with Musky for that gold. Elsie's husband got thrown from a cayuse and can't work good. Joe and me—Elsie was good to us when we were kids. She must be forty-five now, I guess—she was almost like a mother to Joe and me, bein' so much older. That snap's twenty years old."

Lew looked at her, and there was a shine to her eyes that he guessed meant something very special. He leaned over and kissed her once.

Then he went back to Morgan Carter's papers, and Fay was contented enough, sitting there, watching him go methodically through everything. He was a peace officer, first and last, and there was much to do to clean up Thundercloud and the Thunder country. . . .

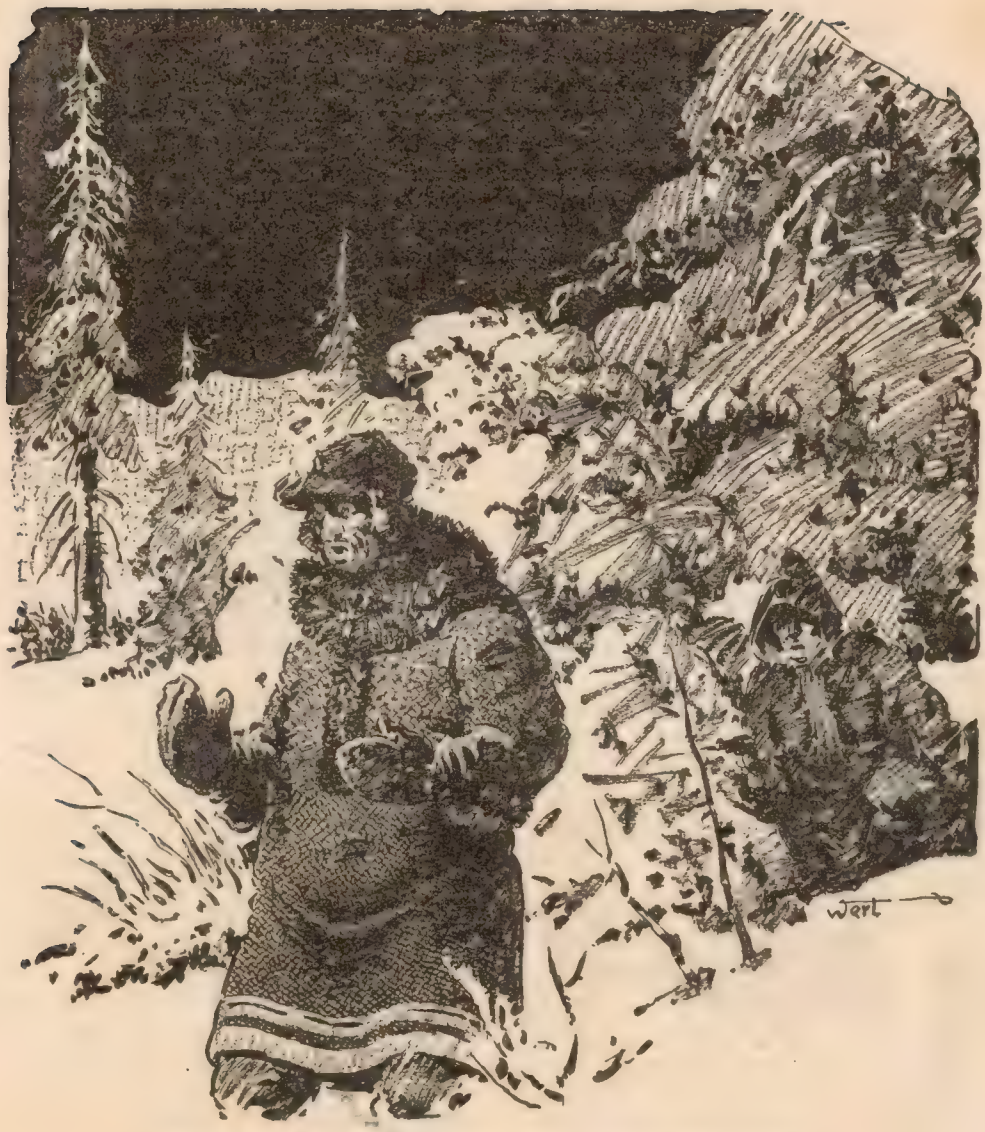
And he would have to dig up Joe and send him home. . . . Too cold for a Texan up here! . . . Although there was something about the country. . . . Of course he would be going home himself, and taking Fay, too . . . after he went up and got himself some of that gold, with Musky. . . .

Yes, the Thunder country had its points! He wouldn't leave right away—later—yes, maybe later—he and Fay.

THE TUNDRA TAMER

A Stirring Novelet of the Frozen Frontier

By FREDERICK L. NEBEL



Wandel cowered back—squarely into a bushwhacker's bullet!

Dawson was the toughest town in the Klondike, and Duke Wandel was its trail-mask king. Chechako Jeff Barnes invaded that stronghold of plunder trail for a stolen kiss from a golden girl—and murder-hell broke loose on the frozen streets.

SOMEWHERE at the far end of the murky saloon a piano banged and a violin screeched an accompaniment. A big, round bellied stove glowed red. A roulette wheel whirred and chips rattled. A man cursed his soul in a high pitched, maudlin voice, and a woman laughed hysterically. A window smashed. There was

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a shot. A scream. But nobody gave heed.

Jeff Barnes leaned with his back to the bar, one heel hooked on the rail. He frowned perplexedly. He'd lived his life on the far ragged edges of the world. He'd seen the hell-divers of the east—and the jungle. He'd seen everything, he thought. But when the north let loose he frowned and wondered.

A small chunky man with a red beard and twinkling blue eyes turned to the lean six-footer.

"Cheechako, huh?" he asked Jeff. "You wonderin' what's happened?" He jerked his head toward the crowd in the barroom and grinned slowly.

Barnes unlimbered his blackened briar pipe.

"Sure, to the first question," he said. "Guess you'd call me cheechako. And I *was* wondering what the ruckus was about.

"Thought so," the little fellow answered. "Could see it in yore face. But yuh don't look so soft an' yuh needn't worry about things like this." He nodded again toward the group of men. "Just some feller gettin' throwed out. It happens regular. Ain't I been throwed out o' more damn places between Dyea an' the Nordenscold than any sourdough in the hull damn North?"

Barnes smiled at the cocky little miner.

"I can appreciate your pride in such a record," he said. "And I suppose that you got a bullet in the slats every time—and liked it?"

"Well naw. . . ." Redwhiskers paused to chuckle. "Naw. I reckon I ain't been shot at much. That would kinder make me sore. But I tell you, my friend, this is tough country. Half o' these critters will never get over the Chilkoot. An' half o' them as gets over will wish to hell they never did." He paused a moment and raised his bushy red eyebrows. "You goin' to Dawson?"

"I am!" nodded Barnes, as though it was a cinch.

"It takes a man to buck the Yukon these days," said the old-timer.

"You take me for a Boy Scout?" Barnes asked.

"Wal. . . ."

"Huh? . . ."

For a long moment the little man sized up the big one. Long and lean and hard, he was. And the big man sized up the little one. Tough and wiry and solid. Then the little man grinned.

"My friend," he said, "if yuh didn't look so gol darned capable I'd say 'yes.'"

"And if you weren't a little guy I'd smack you one for that."

"Good! My name's Brick Jordon." And Brick stuck out his hand.

"And mine's Jeff Barnes." They shook solemnly. Friendships were made that way in those days in the gold outposts.

THEY had a brace of drinks on it and it warmed up Barnes' insides. It made him feel lucky and he said so.

"Brick, I've got a measly seventy-five dollars. That won't cut much ice. I'm going to become rich. When I'm through we won't be able to lug my money."

Brick Jordon wagged his head. "My friend, you got too much confidence."

"Watch me!" clipped Barnes.

He shouldered his way from the bar to the roulette wheel and stood watching the players. Brick Jordon drifted after him, throwing away his old chew and taking a fresh one. Barnes stood there for a quarter of an hour without playing, and then when a man slipped away with a mournful countenance, he placed five one-dollar chips on number twenty-five. The ball whirred, stopped. Barnes won a hundred and seventy-five dollars.

Following this he placed some scattered bets and managed to win seventy-five dollars. Then he took a chance again on number twenty-five, placing ten chips, and cleared up three hundred and fifty dollars. The next five bets he lost, and then three times in a row he won, adding a thousand dollars to his pile.

By this time he had drawn the attention of the other players and the onookers, and the game-keeper began to throw him sidelong distasteful looks. But Barnes went on smoking his pipe and giving his attention to no one, and his luck stayed with him. Brick Jordon, forgetting to grind his chew, looked on with an amused and rather pleased half-smile twitching at his mouth.

Barnes continued to win, and when he had cleared up thirty-five hundred dollars the keeper said: "You sure are ridin' a hunch, ain't you, stranger?"

"I sure am, keeper," replied Barnes.

"Well, how about tryin' your luck at another table?"

"This one suits me, all right."

"I know, but it don't suit me."

Barnes took his pipe from his mouth and bit the man with a level, hard stare. "Tin-horn, eh?" he queried.

"I ain't just runnin' a charity table, that's all."

"Dam' right, you're not. Never knew roulette to be a charitable game. It's my night, and I'm playing my luck."

"Well, play it somewhere else."

A tall, dark man, standing near the keeper, raised his finger and said to Barnes: "How's your luck at cards, stranger?"

"Good tonight," replied Barnes. "How's yours?"

"Tolerable."

"All right, let's go. This tin-horn keeper is looking for suckers."

Brick Jordon plucked at his sleeve. "Better go easy, my friend."

"This is my night," Barnes chuckled.

IT *was* his night. Good cards came his way from the very start, and every time he opened he made the ante so stiff that some of the players squirmed.

One of these was a slim, sallow young man who appeared very much out of place in that rough, raw company. Ted Hillyer was his name, and his chips dwindled rapidly under the hard, seasoned playing of the others. He kept wetting his lips and fidgeting with his cards, and his dark eyes were feverish with the hope of winning and the dread of losing.

When he lost on three jacks against Barnes' three queens, he flung his cards in the air and beat with his fists on the table.

"Dammit," he flung at Barnes, "can't you hold small cards?"

"Not tonight," replied Barnes, stacking his chips. "If the game's too stiff, why don't you drop out?"

"Drop out, my eye!"

"Well, then stop crabbing. This is not penny ante."

Hillyer slumped back in his chair and glowered at the next five cards that were dealt him.

Barnes went on winning, sweeping aside all opposition and taking it all as a matter of course. Watchers milled about the table, and he became the object of admiration and not a little envy.

He had increased his seventy-five dollars to five thousand, and was well on the way to another thousand when Hillyer ran out of money.

"Here," said the young man huskily. "How much will you give me for this?" He held up a diamond ring, while his feverish eyes darted hungrily about the table.

Barnes said: "Better keep it for a rainy day. This is my night, and I can see it's not yours. You'll lose your shirt."

"Never mind about that," snapped Hillyer. "What are you—afraid I'll stage a come-back?"

"Not a bit of it," laughed Barnes shortly. "All right. Let's see the trinket."

He picked up the ring, regarded it closely, held it up to the light and remarked: "This is a lady's ring."

"Well, what about it?" asked Hillyer.

"Nothing. Give you a hundred dollars in chips."

Hillyer agreed, and the game went on. But, indeed, it was not his night. His chips dribbled into the pot, and his last chip went in a stiff betting tilt with Barnes. He lost, and with that he leaped to his feet, shaking with passion.

"Damn you," he hurled at Barnes, "you're one of these lousy, crooked card sharps! You can't lose! You—"

"Easy there!" someone warned.

But Hillyer kicked back his chair, flung off a restraining arm and shook his knotted fists at Barnes.

"You—you're crooked!" he screamed, half sobbing.

Barnes laid down his blackened pipe and stood up, and there was a bad light in his keen, hard eyes. Calmly he walked around the table, to face the palsied stranger. Hillyer backed away, his lower lip quivering, his eyes blazing with a rage wild and impotent. With a sudden, frantic movement he dived for the gun at his hip.

BARNES leaped swiftly, surely, like a great charging cat. He caught Hillyer's hand on the draw, and a shot went wild through the ceiling.

"Drop that gun!" he barked.

"You—you—"

"Drop it or I'll break your arm!"

Hillyer writhed and squirmed, trying to tear himself loose. His gun went off again and a shot smashed one of the lamps hanging from the ceiling. Barnes rushed him against the wall, bent his arm behind his back and twisted his wrist in a hold that made the young man cry out with pain. He dropped the gun, and then Barnes sent him tumbling across the room. He sprawled over the faro table, crashed down on the floor with a couple of chairs on top of him.

Then the door banged open and a woman stood on the threshold, flinging inquisitive eyes about the smoke-filled, boisterous saloon. Her gaze settled on Hillyer as he was rising on wobbly legs, his face bruised and bleeding. With a little cry she ran to him and put her arms about him, aiding him to his feet.

She somehow threw a spell over the rough-clad, rough-mannered men. The din died, and the men edged away and backward. She was a young woman, very young, very pretty in her tan mackinaw and moosehide moccasins. Her toque was many-hued, and that part of her hair which showed beneath it shimmered like spun gold. Her eyes, now, were two dark pools of anger and indignation as she looked over the men.

"Who did this?" she cried.

The men scuffled about uneasily. A bartender breathed into a glass and polished it with a great show of industry while he gazed at the ceiling and whistled noiselessly. Brick Jordon shifted his chew, cleared his throat and ventured:

"Miss, he brung it on himself, he did. He was playin' cards an' he lost right along, an' when he was cleaned out he called a man crooked."

"Well, I shouldn't be surprised if you were crooked," she gave Brick hotly. "You look like a crooked man, anyhow. You are all wolves—all of you! Look at his poor face. You—you must have kicked him!"

"Miss, it wasn't me—"

"I'm the man you want to talk to, Miss," cut in Barnes, coming forward, his hands jammed into his mackinaw pockets.

"Then you—you kicked him, you brute!" she accused.

"No. I beat him at cards," corrected Barnes evenly. "I cleaned him out and he accused me of playing crooked. He pulled his gun and I took it away from him and flung him off. He fell over a table and in the mix-up he got kicked."

"Oh, you are just a smooth-tongued gambler," she told him. "I know your type. The Yukon will be swamped with them. You wait and sit in the warm dives and fleece the men who hunt for gold. You haven't the courage to tackle the Arctic trails. It takes a man to do that."

She dragged Hillyer toward the door. A man opened it and the two disappeared.

In the saloon the tension relaxed. Men began to move about. Glasses clinked at the bar. The roulette wheel whirred. The din grew again, and a moment later the piano and violin broke into action.

"Well," said Brick, "that's that."

"A mighty pretty girl," mused Barnes, gathering up his money. "Wonder what she's doing in Dyea."

"Dunno. Anyhow, let's have that drink I spoke about before."

"Wonder what relation she is to the young chum."

"Dunno. Maybe his wife. Anyhow, you smooth tongued gambler"—he grinned —"let's have that drink."

HALF an hour later they were out under the low, clear stars of the evening, moving side by side down the beach, where many campfires glowed. Neither had sworn partnership to the other, yet they kept together, and it seemed that as yet they had no intention of parting.

"Well, you sure had a lucky evenin'," Brick remarked as they reached Barnes' luggage.

"Just as I told you," replied Barnes. "I felt it in my bones. Only it was rotten to have it end up that way."

"Well, women is women," philosophized Brick. "They act first an' think afterwards. They can call a man all kinds o' names an' he's jest gotta stand for it. Women with me is tabu. Some men says women is a necessary evil, like hootch, African dominoes an' castor oil. I can do without all o' them."

"Brick," chuckled Barnes, lighting a fresh pipe, "you get interesting. I don't agree with you, but you're interesting. What do say to rooking up with me and beating the Yukon to a frazzle?"

"Who, me? Huh! My friend, I'm almost dead broke."

"But you know the Yukon."

"Yeah, I reckon I oughter."

"All right. I don't. What I lack in knowledge of the country and what you lack in funds and equipment make things about even. We need each other, I think."

"Lookin' at it that way, maybe you're right," nodded Brick. "I'd sure like to hook up with you. You got brains. You got guts. You're the best damn cheechako I ever seen."

So the compact was made, and the two men, vastly different, became partners.

BRICK, having lugged over his own equipage, departed again to hire some Indians for the pull over Chilkoot. Barnes was lying on his blankets by the campfire, smoking his pipe and meditating, when a mackinawed figure detached itself from the horde on the beach and came toward him. He saw it was Hillyer, and nodded curtly with no friendly overtures.

"Listen, Barnes," said Hillyer. "I'd like to buy that ring back."

"Why?" asked Barnes.

"Well, Id just like to. I've got the hundred dollars with me."

"What makes you think I'll take a hundred dollars?"

Hillyer's eyes clouded and he bit his lip for a moment. "Well, I thought you'd take a hundred, seeing as—"

"Seeing as I paid you a hundred for it. Who was the lady came and took you away from the saloon?"

"Why—why, my sister."

Barnes frowned over his pipe. Then he said suddenly:

"Tell you what, Hillyer. I don't like the opinion the lady must have of me. I'll return the ring to her personally. You'll come with me and tell what a damned fool you were."

"No—no," Hillyer hastened to object. "I—I'll give you the money here."

"To hell with your money! I want myself squared with the lady. And, by the way, where did you get the hundred dollars?"

"I—I— Well, I don't see—"

"As it's any of my business." He sat up abruptly, took the pipe from his mouth and pointed the stem at Hillyer. "I'm curious about something. When I was a kid in college I sold diamonds to help pay my way, and I got to know quite a bit about them. Now I'm curious to know why you're willing to pay me a hundred dollars for an imitation diamond that's worth about ten dollars, if that."

Hillyer opened his mouth to say something, but closed it again sharply and ground one mittened hand in the palm of the other, while his eyes darted about evasively.

"Come, Hillyer, and tell me why," pursued Barnes.

"I—I well, I always thought it was genuine,

"I don't mind telling you that I think you're lying. At any rate, you'll take me to your sister. I paid you the hundred dollars for a whim, and to give you a last chance for a come-back. Now it's my whim to have myself squared."

"Dammit, Barnes, you're hard—hard as nails."

"So I am. Hard as hell."

"But I won't take you to her!"

"All right," nodded Barnes. "Then you'll not get the ring."

Hillyer stood up, his hands clenched, his lower lip quivering under the whiplash of chagrin. Then he pivoted on his heel and tramped off.

"See you in Dawson," Barnes called after him.

II

THERE were no dogs or sleds to be had in Dyea for love nor money. Hence, on the following day, Barnes and Brick pulled out of town with twelve hundred pounds of freight and a string of Indians that promised to see them over Chilkoot. As they trudged past the many groups preparing to start also, Barnes saw Hillyer standing some distance off, in company with another man. He slowed down a trifle, and Brick, who was bent way over under his one-hundred-pound pack, bumped into him.

"Darn it, Jeff, don't stop sudden like that," he complained.

"Sorry, Brick, old brick. Just caught Hillyer looking at me, and he doesn't seem pleasant. Know the bird with him?"

Brick craned his neck.

"Sure. They call him 'Duke' Wandel. Owns a saloon in Dawson an' makes

money. A big-timer, smooth as glass an' hard as iron."

Barnes murmured, "H'm," and moved on, wondered vaguely what Hillyer and Duke Wandel had in common.

But soon the task at hand made him give it all his attention. He began to know what real work meant as he toiled along under his mountainous pack, with every muscle in his lean, strong body taxed to its utmost.

He felt the jab of the Arctic cold probing his skin, coursing into his lungs, numbing his nose. He felt the frost forming around his mouth where his breath fell back to freeze. He was on the long, hard trail to Dawson, along with thousands of other men, and he was out to make a fortune.

He knew that days and weeks of toil, of snow and ice and low temperatures, lay ahead. Yet he believed that he could overcome every grim obstacle the Northland had to offer. He had stood up against other hard lands before that.

The days that followed tested his mettle. At first his halts were frequent, for although his muscles were in good trim they had to be tuned to this particular kind of work. Once or twice the Indians evidenced a desire to desert them, but Barnes bribed them with more money and kept them on.

On the way up Chilkoot he thought his back would break or his head would snap from his shoulders. Although a raw wind whooped down from the icy heights, he sweated under his burden. Yet he saw Brick sweating and straining, too, and he saw many others collapse on the awful grind.

At the top of the pass, a thousand feet above timberline, the Indians dropped their packs, were paid off, and returned. From then on the two partners were forced, like many others, to move their freight forward in relays.

When they made a twilight camp at Crater Lake not a breath of a breeze stirred, but the air was bitter cold.

"Well, she's some tourist country, ain't she, Jeff?" bantered Brick.

"She's my meat, Brick."

It was a raw, bitter night, with the passionless vault of the Arctic sky coldly aflame with millions of low-hanging stars. The two partners faced each other across their small campfire, hunched in their thick winter robes, smoking after-supper pipes. Here and there in the windless gloom other campfires glowed, with men and packs in black silhouette. Snatches of conversation drifted vaguely about.

Brick was the first to crawl into the small tent, and Barnes, finishing his pipe a little later, followed him. He was tired with the tiredness of lusty health, and dropped off to sleep almost immediately.

Some time later he awoke to find several dim, fur-swathed figures bending over him. He started to heave up, to say something. A long revolver barrel rapped against his forehead. He slumped back, gritting his teeth. His brain spun crazily and his muscles seemed suddenly sapped of strength.

VAGUELY he sensed that rough, strong hands were dragging him from the tent. Then he was being held on his feet and half-dragged, half-carried away from the tent. The cold bit through his clothing and gnawed into his marrow. But it revived his dazed senses, and soon he was able to see that he was being taken through a stretch of dwarfed trees. He saw no campfire, no camps.

Soon his captors stopped in the lee of a spruce grove. The one who had brought up the rear swung ahead and disappeared. A few moments later he returned with another man. This man was tall and well-built and strode with something of a swagger. His parka hood was drawn close about his face, concealing his features.

"Where's that ring?" he asked in a muffled voice.

"Find it," said Barnes.

"Sure."

The man, bending his head so that Barnes could not catch a glimpse of his face, began a quick, systematic search. He gave a satisfied grunt, stepped back and thrust the ring into his pocket. Briefly, then, he spoke to his Indians:

"You got your orders. Go to it. Meet us at Linderman." With that he spun on his heel and trudged off.

Barnes felt the Indians' hands tighten on his arms. The third man got behind him and poked him in the back with a revolver. He was shoved along through a

mass of low thickets that clawed at his legs. He had not seen the mysterious man's face, but he reasoned that it was Duke Wandel, whom he had seen in company with Hillyer as he and Brick were pulling out of Dyea. The man was too big for Hillyer, and, reflected Barnes, his build was mighty like that of the man whom Brick had pointed out as Duke Wandel.

But why so much ado over one solitary ring, and especially a ring that was worth no more than ten dollars?

The Indians were still forcing him along. For a while he thought that they were taking him back to camp, but now he realized that they were not.

They left the dwarfed trees and plodded across a bald, bleak ridge, then swung down an ice-hummocked ravine. For an hour—and still another hour—they trudged on, winding through clumps of wind-blown willows and dwarf oaks, or across stretches of muskeg where slush ice crackled under their feet.

They wound up along a twisted, ice-caked ridge of solid rock. Dimly Barnes could see below into a dark ravine, walled on all sides by sheer rock coated with ice, and he thought they were traveling perilously close to the edge.

Then doom swept down upon him. The Indians, who had been plodding along doggedly, suddenly whirled to life. Barnes was swung around sharply, while the Indian who had been dogging his footsteps, bent down, wrapped arms about Barnes' legs and threw him. The other two hurled him away savagely at the same instant, and a split-second later Barnes was hurtling down the steep wall of the ravine.

WHEN Brick Jordan won back to consciousness he realized that he had been dealt a savage blow on the head. He remembered vaguely dark figures bending over him and then the crushing impact of a revolver butt. Barnes was missing from the tent.

He struggled into his trail togs, took a gun and shuffled out into the starlit gloom. He found a trail leading away from the tent and followed it.

The trail led away from the camps and through clumps of thickets and dwarfed trees. He wound after it, bent over to see the tracks, trudging doggedly. Later he dragged to a stop in a small spruce grove and scratched his beard perplexedly.

He saw two diverging trails. One was made by a single pair of feet; the other by the four pairs of footprints he had followed from the camp. For a while he was undetermined which trail to follow. Finally, however, he chose the one made by the four men. Barnes apparently was still with the three who had made him prisoner.

So he plodded north, while the Aurora flung its pale, fantastic ribbons of cold fire across the night sky and the ragged wilderness. The stars were dimmed. The wind blew with an edge, sighing plaintively. From far away came the lost-soul call of a wolf.

On the crest of a ridge studded with wind-blown, ravaged scrub, Brick stopped to spell his lungs and to scan the pale, nebulous gloom that lay over the hushed land like a frosted mist. He saw no signs of life, and muttered in his beard.

"I'd sure like to know what them bums are up to," he mused bitterly. "Poor Jeff, so chock full o' grit an' ambition an' then goin' an' gettin' kidnapped before we reach even Linderman or White Horse. It ain't the crack on the dome that makes me sore. It's seein' a real, honest he-man like Jeff gettin' such a dirty break."

He rasped his throat, spat distastefully, and plodded on. Well, he was Jeff Barnes' partner and so long as there was a trail visible he would follow it to hell and beyond. And if a storm should howl down out of the Polar wastes he would still bang around the country until Jeff was either located or avenged.

All night he traveled, doggedly, tirelessly, losing the trail for a while and then stumbling about until he found it again.

The Aurora faded and the low, cold stars again glittered in the Arctic vault. The pale, frigid winter moon sailed its course across the desolate, beshrouded wilds and steered for other, gentler worlds that lay back of beyond.

IT was near noon of the following day that Brick Jordon looked over the edge of the blind pocket and exclaimed: "Hell!"

He saw Barnes staggering about in circles, shoulders sagging, legs bent at the

knees, chin pressed to chest. He was fascinated, and remained quiet for a long moment. He was fascinated at the spectacle of his young partner tottering, swaying, weaving about with a vast, heroic effort, struggling doggedly to stay on his feet, to stave off the cold, sinister clutch of the Arctic.

And suddenly Jordon, hard soul though he was, felt pity and at the same time admiration for the man. It was that picture of heroic effort, of dauntless spirit that welded a friendship more enduring than gold.

"Hey, Jeff!" he called down.

Barnes sloshed to a standstill and looked up through blurred, red-rimmed eyes. He swayed on his spread feet like a great tree in the grip of a storm.

"Lo, Brick!"

"Listen!" shouted Jordon. "I see you're bottled up. Now look here. I'll drop down some wood and matches an' you go make a fire and kinder thaw out. Meanwhile I'll hoof it off to the nearest camp an' see if I can get some rope to haul you up. Get me?"

Barnes nodded.

"All right, then," went on Brick. "Now I'll gather some wood."

He left the ridge, and soon was back with an armful of dead branches, which he threw down into the pocket with a bunch of matches.

"I'll get back quick as I can," called down Brick. "Then we'll talk things over."

Barnes waved wearily, stumbled to pile the wood in a heap, and in a while had a fire going. He chuckled grimly, ironically. Now more than ever he was resolved to bludgeon his way through the remorseless North to Dawson.

It was to be war.

HE sat by his little fire, warming himself, resting, and vitality steadily pumped through his system again. Brick appeared on the ridge as the early twilight of the high altitudes was spreading its eagle winds over the vast sweep of desolation.

He had a coil of heavy rope with him, and he snaked it down into the pocket. Barnes made a loop at his end and wedged it under his arms. Brick shouted:

"Kinder walk up the side as I keep haulin', Jeff. All right now. Let's go."

Brick began pulling, and slowly but surely Barnes was drawn up from the grim pocket that had impressed him as a living tomb, terrible in its serene silence. When he reached the ridge he crawled to safety and dropped down, relaxing his aching muscles.

"Well, Brick, old brick," he said, almost jocularly, "I owe you one life."

Brick spat out of the corner of his mouth. His broad, rugged face was grave. "Cripes, Jeff, you got a dirty deal, all right!"

"How'd you come to find me, Brick?"

"Well, mostly by dumb luck—nothin' else. I see you're gone. Then I started trailin'. An' how about you?"

Briefly Barnes told what had happened, and added: I'm sure it was Duke Wandell in the clump of trees. He took the ring and the Indians brought me here and pitched me over."

"An' now what's on your mind, Jeff?"

Barnes got to his feet slowly, flexing his tired muscles.

"Dawson's still on my mind, Brick—Dawson or bust—and"—he paused, his eyes narrowing, his lips flattening against his teeth—"Dawson and Duke Wandel and that limp-kneed Hillyer."

"Jeff, remember Wandel's a big guy in Dawson—big an' powerful," observed Brick.

"When I get through with him, pardner, he'll be smaller than a louse. If you want to break with me now, all right. I'm not asking you to put your foot in my personal pot of trouble."

Brick's jaw went up, and his hands knotted. "Jeff, we started from Dyea pardners. We're pardners now. I ain't the kind pulls my freight alone when trouble's around the corner. I'm a hunk o' glue, Jeff, old boy, an' I stick like hell."

Barnes grinned and laid his hand on the stocky man's shoulder.

"Brick, you sure *are* a brick. I'm almighty glad I met you in Dyea. From now on we're two hunks of glue—iron glue, pardner—and we'll stick."

Their hands met, gripped hard. Then Barnes said:

"All right, Brick. Let's get back to camp."

III

DAWSON, the goal of thousands, the bright star by which men steered a trail of hope from the far reaches of the world, was beginning to shiver under the first bites of the probing fangs of winter. Snow had fallen weeks before, and short spells of cold had snapped out over the land, but only now was the real, grim North boring in and starting to stifle the wilderness rivers with ice.

Duke Wandel was in from the south. He had barely escaped the freeze-up, but he was in, satisfied with himself. He did not arrive as other men arrived—bearded, haggard, grimy from the toil of the trail. He arrived with the swagger which was part of him, his head up, challenge in his hard, pale eyes, a slow, crooked smile on his lips. He was clean-shaven, and his trail togs showed no signs of wear. He always traveled with two dozen men. Even so he arrived in Dawson.

He left his two companions—Ted and Ruth Hillyer—in a snug cabin within the town limits, and strolled over to his saloon. He strode in through the main entrance chewing on a fresh cigar. For a moment he stood in the doorway, letting in cold drafts of Arctic air, so that the attention of the crowd would be drawn in that direction. Then when the murmur of greeting rose to a din, he chuckled through his smile-twisted lips, kicked the door shut with his heel, and with a self-satisfied, slightly pompous air headed for the bar.

"Everybody drinks on me—on the Pot of Gold, biggest and best saloon in the Yukon," he boomed as he reached the bar. "Pile up, you sourdoughs and trail-pounders and cheechakos. Rinse your throats with rum, you hard-hides!"

He flung his powerful hand aloft. It pleased him to make a grand gesture.

"Belly up!" he boomed loudly.

Cheers surged from lustry throats through the vast board structure, and moccasined and booted feet thumped and rasped against the floor as the men stormed the bar. Women in spangled, gaudy dresses squirmed and clawed one another to get a look at Duke Wandel. Bearded, sweaty men who had been their escorts but a short time back, swore in undertone, and envied the owner of the Pot of Gold.

One of these women, whom Dawson knew as Dolly Bodine, managed to weave her way to Wandel's side. She was pretty in a hard, glassy way, with a mop of jet, gleaming hair piled high, and a black, tight-fitting dress with a big, artificial gardenia on her right hip.

"Hello, Duke," she greeted, smiling tentatively, while a worried, hopeful light shimmered in her midnight eyes.

"Why, hello there, Dolly, old girl!" replied Wandel, clapping her on the back. "Have a drink."

"Sure." She laughed jerkily. "How—have you been, Duke?"

"Fine. Always fine." He shouted to one of the bartenders: "Drink for Dolly, Mike."

The girl leaned her elbow on the bar, threw sidelong, troubled looks at the big debonair man, whose blond, slick-down hair gleamed under the hanging oil-lamps. A vague tracery of pain flickered across her painted face.

But Wandel seemed to have forgotten her. Several men on his right were complimenting him, making conversation, roaring with laughter at any slight witticism he flipped from his lips. Liquor slopped in glasses as a half dozen bartenders jumped to keep a half hundred palates moist and tingling.

Presently Wandel turned to pour himself another drink, and saw the expression of anguish on Dolly's face. He swung his eyes away pretending not to have seen, and sank his drink at one throw. Then he turned his back to the bar, and, still avoiding the woman's gaze, clapped her on the back.

"See you later, old girl," he said and started through the crowd.

She caught at his arms, swallowing hard. "Duke, can't you—let's sit in one of the booths and—well, talk a little?"

"Now, Dolly, run along like a good girl. I'm in from a hard trail and I want to be alone."

She followed him through the crowd, her lips trembling, but released his arm and stopped as she shrugged clear near one of the poker tables and waved to "Silver" Sam Hess. Silver Sam nodded briefly, his lean, dark face emotionless, his black eyes steady.

"Hello, Duke," he droned.

He had been watching Dolly and Wandel, and perhaps his thin lips were a little tighter than usual under his black rapier-like mustache. His eyes shifted swiftly, almost imperceptibly, from Wandel to Dolly, and then dropped to a stack of chips on the table. He sat down quietly, shuffled a pack of cards, and placed them down for the cut. His thin, passionless face was shadowed by the broad brim of his steel-gray Stetson, but his eyes glowed like two living coals.

WANDEL climbed a short flight of stairs, crossed a balcony that overlooked the broad, crowded hall, and entered a hallway that led to his private rooms in the rear left wing. Moy Pock, the shriveled, charred clinker of a Chinese who saw to his creature comforts and took care of his rooms, clapped his bony hands and chuckled dryly:

"Ah, the Master is come!"

"In a little while," said Wandel, eyeing his servant stonily, "a man will come to see me. Show him in. He is a friend of mine."

The Chinese bowed, spreading his hands palmwise, and then helped Wandel off with his trail togs.

Half-an-hour later young Hillyer showed up. His pale face was drawn, and his eyes shifty. Wandel, wrapped in a snug bathrobe, was reclining in an easy-chair, his slippered feet resting on a footstool, a tall glass of liquor on the table at his elbow.

"Sit down," he flung at Hillyer. "Bury a drink under your belt, boy. Hell, you look like a bad case of nerves." Subtle mockery clung to his words.

Hillyer flopped down, poured himself a stiff shot of rum and choked as he sent it coursing down his throat.

"I—my nerves are jumpy," he agreed. "But—I guess I'll be all right. Ever since that job at Crater Lake—"

"Bah!" scoffed Wandel. "I pulled the trick, didn't I?"

"You're—sure he'll never turn up?"

"Don't see how he can. My three boys dropped him into a blind ravine, way off the trail. If anybody ever finds him—well, he'll be dead by that time, and—the answer? He slipped, fell down there."

"I know—I know—"

"Then cut out your blasted yammering!" Wandel's pale, hard eyes flashed. He leaned forward. "You sure bungled things in Dyea, you young fool! Why didn't you let this guy Barnes give the ring to Ruth in the first place?"

"How could I? He might have passed a remark about its real value, and Ruth doesn't know anything about the rings. You know I had them shipped on to Dyea ahead of me."

"Well, anyway, you shouldn't have gambled with that hunk of glass in the first place. I thought you had more brains. Personally, the outfit of fake jewelry means nothing to me. I passed the hint to you that a little lump could be made up here by a man who was keen enough to set up a little store and sell fake jewels to these boneheads who don't know a diamond from a hunk of ice.

"I knew you were only a jeweler's clerk, and the idea'd hit you. With that outfit you've got you can clean up damn near forty thousand dollars. I'm your backer—apparently. I'll put you up in the little store down the street. My price to you, as we've made plain before, is that you do everything in your power to make Ruth like me—and accept me."

"Yes—yes," nodded Hillyer nervously. "But you know why Ruth came. She call's it for humanity's sake. About the hospital you said you were fixing up, and wanted a good nurse to take charge of it."

"It's near the end of the town," replied Wandel. "Used to be a saloon, but I bought the guy out. She'll have full swing there. She never cared much for me back in Denver. But I've always wanted her, boy, and I'll get her eventually."

"When she sees all you're doing to help humanity, she'll change gradually." mused Hillyer.

"Yes, but she's not shown it much on the way in from Dyea. Now you get busy, boy, and see that she treats me right."

"I—I'll try my hardest," mumbled Hillyer, shifty-eyed.

"You'd better," said Wandel.

TWO weeks passed. Dawson crouched under the hard lash of the full-grown winter. The thermometer bowled down to fifty below. A blizzard, born on the Polar rim, grew to Gargantuan proportions and drove its devastating legions across the

hard-bitten land. In its wake it left death and starvation and shattered hopes. Men were buried alive in tombs of snow, side by side with the animals of the wilds, on lonely trails and in vast, unmapped valleys.

But Dawson honkatonks bleated and blared with the unrestrained, glamorous merrymaking of a frontier camp. Sunken-eyed men plugged in from their diggings and poured dust and nuggets over the rum-soaked bars, and into the clutching hands of dance-hall women. The roulette wheels whirred a direful tune, and poker chips rattled a death-knell for more than one reckless fool drunk with the weight of gold.

Jeff Barnes and Brick Jordon plugged into Dawson at the fag-end of the blizzard. They had been caught in the freeze-up, but Barnes had insisted on pushing through to Dawson if it was the last thing he accomplished, and Brick had fallen into the habit of taking his word as law.

They stacked their dunnage in big mounds and set up their tent. They gathered a stack of firewood and made a fire in the sheet-iron stove within their tent. Night closed down upon them, and they cooked a meal. They were dog-tired, and following their after-supper pipes, they turned in instead of making the rounds of the town's saloons.

"Well, Jeff, we're here," said Brick.

"Right," replied Barnes. "The beginning of the end, Brick."

"Better go easy, Jeff."

"Watch me!" chuckled Barnes.

BARNES did not start off for the center of Dawson until near noon of the following day. He spent the morning with clipper and razor and changed into fresh clothing. He had lost a little weight on the gruelling mush from Dyea, but he felt fine and looked as straight and as capable as ever.

He walked down Dawson's main street alone, and here and there men turned to gaze after him, and some remarked, "Ain't that the guy scared the tin-horn gamekeeper in Dyea?"

"Yeah . . . Barnes, I think."

"Now there's something about that feller I like. . . ."

Barnes continued on his way, puffing his blackened briar pipe, elbowing his way among the bearded, grimy men that were in endless motion. And again he was impressed by that air of unrest which had pervaded Dyea and which was more pronounced in Dawson; that vast surge and sweep of humanity, of men on the prod, going and coming, of great things soon to happen. No other country had impressed him so much.

A sign hanging from a small, rough-board shack drew his attention and he slowed down to read it.

THE DAWSON JEWELER

The sign was new, and as he stood under it he saw groups of men bang out, chuckling and clapping one another on the back. He heard snatches of conversation:

". . . got a swell ring for Mazie, Bill—real diamond."

"Me, I got two for Ruby an' two for meself. I ain't no cheap skate, I ain't."

After a few moments of indecision, Barnes pushed open the door and entered the shop. Two miners brushed out past him and he saw that no others were present. Behind a short counter was young Hillyer, bent over and figuring on a pad of paper.

Barnes leaned back against the door and shot home the bolt.

"Greetings," said Barnes simply.

Hillyer straightened. Color drained from his face. His eyes grew wide with awe and fear.

Barnes crossed slowly to the counter and stood spread-legged with his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his fur coat. His keen blue eyes cut into Hillyer like points of steel, and the muscle lumps at either corner of his firm mouth were hard as rock.

"I want to buy a ring," came Barnes' steady, metallic voice, "A good one—say, about two hundred dollars."

There was a glass case on the counter filled with rings and pendants and bracelets.

"Show me your prize collection," pursued Barnes ominously.

Hillyer trembled like a leaf in the wind. Beads of perspiration stood out on his pale forehead. With palsied hands he reached into the case and set a tray of sparkling rings on the wooden counter.

"Give me your glass," demanded Barnes.

"I—I haven't got one."

"Haven't you?" Barnes hand came out of his pocket. In the hand was a revolver.

Hillyer fumbled on a shelf back of the counter and passed across a small eye glass. Quickly Barnes examined a few rings, then flipped the glass back to Hillyer and chuckled bitterly.

"So that's your game, eh?" he rapped out. "Fooling the public. In short, robbing these poor boobs who don't know what to do with their gold."

Customers were pounding at the door, demanding to be let in.

"Hillyer," went on Barnes, "Lock up and stay locked. Do you get me?"

"Y-yes," choked Hillyer, swaying against the counter.

"Now where does this Duke Wandel hang his hat?"

"He—he owns the Pot of Gold."

Barnes nodded. "Remember, you've closed up shop. If I spit what I know, which I'm apt to, ten to one you'll swing at a rope's end." He turned, walked to the door, unbolted it and strode out through the crowd of men.

A LITTLE farther on he entered the Pot of Gold Saloon, with his hand gripping the gun in his pocket. The place was only half-full, and only one of the roulette tables was in action. His eyes swept the place in a quick, thorough survey, but he saw no sign of Wandel.

He crossed to the bar and ordered a drink. A woman was standing next to him. It was Dolly Bodine, and she looked sad and meditative. Looking at Barnes, her face relaxed and she heaved a sigh.

"Hello, stranger," she said, with a half-smile.

"Hello," replied Barnes. "Have a drink."

"Sure thing."

They drank to each other's health and then Barnes turned half around and hooked his foot on the rail, again scanning the big hall.

"Just in?" asked Dolly, trying to make conversation.

"Just in," returned Barnes.

Dolly looked him over with something akin to approval. He was, indeed, not bad to look at. Perhaps not as debonair as Wandel, but he possessed that unconscious poise, that lean, clean, spring-steel ruggedness, that attracts attention."

"You seem to be looking for someone," she ventured.

"Yes. I thought Duke might be hanging around."

"You want to see Duke?"

"Oh, there's no hurry."

"Well, he's upstairs in his rooms—rear left."

Barnes took his foot from the rail and rubbed his jaw.

"Guess I'll go up and chin with him," he said casually.

He left Dolly, mounted the stairway and walked back to the door leading into Wandel's quarters. He tried the door, eased it open, and strode in. His hand was firm in his right pocket.

Moy Pock appeared phantom-like, rubbing his hands together, bowing, grinning his dry, cracked grin.

"Duke," clipped Barnes.

"Wait," said Moy Pock.

Barnes brushed the Chinese aside and walked on into the next room.

Wandel's face was expressionless now. The first flash of surprise had disappeared. He leaned back in his chair, knocked the ash from his cigar.

Moy Pock bowed, glanced at Barnes quizzically, and went out.

Barnes pulled his revolver from his pocket and held it steady.

"Get up, Wandel," he said crisply. "Walk into the other room and lock the outer door."

Wandel rose and under threat of Barnes' gun crossed into the other room and turned the key in the lock.

"Now put up your hands," ordered Barnes.

Deftly he searched Wandel for weapons, and finding none, told him to back into the other room. Wandel stood at full eight, rolling his cigar back and forth between his lips, appearing unperturbed and a little amused.

"Wandel," said Barnes, "you're a cool head, but you're surprised to find me alive. Your three Indians almost did a good job. I'm here to settle. I played my first card a little while ago. I made Hillyer close his shop and quit selling fake diamonds."

Wandel's eyes narrowed and his cigar remained motionless in his mouth.

"Now," continued Barnes, unbuttoning his coat, "I'm going to start on you. You're going to get the beating of your life. Shed as much as you want."

IV

IN height they were the same—six feet. Wandel, apparently, had the edge in weight. There was plenty of beef in his shoulders, and there was no doubting the fact that he knew how to handle himself. Barnes was leaner, and looked tougher in his leanness, and his muscular mechanism ran smoothly, like a wheel on ball-bearings.

He took the offensive, up on his toes. Wandel stood flat-footed, his chin in the air, his long arms stretched for long-range work. He blocked Barnes' first rush and smacked the lean man a glancing blow above the left ear.

Barnes recovered, lowered his head, weaved in to break through Wandel's guard. Wandel staggered and clinched and for a moment they toiled about the room locked in each other's arms.

Then Wandel, his head clear, broke of his own accord and snapped a shot to Barnes' cheek as he fell out of the clinch. Barnes shook off the effects and waded in with a dazzling array of lefts and rights that drove Wandel up against the wall. When they broke clear, Wandel's left eye was swollen and his lips were puffed and bleeding.

He lunged at Barnes and they exchanged hard, smashing blows at close quarters. Barnes took a crack on the point of the jaw and went toppling to the floor. He was on his feet in a flash, however, and again they went to it at close quarters, driving blow after blow, breathing hard, laying each other's skin open with hard-knuckled fists that were slippery with blood.

A sweeping blow landed flush on Barnes' jaw and he went careening over an upturned chair and smashed to the floor on his back. For a moment he lay still, while Wandel reeled about the room half-blinded, groping with his hands, choking for breath.

Barnes rolled over on his stomach, clawed dazedly to his knees, sagged a bit, then heaved to a crouch with a great effort and squinted as Wandel lunged for him. The two big men met with a thundering impact, each driving home a terrific, paralyzing blow.

Barnes came through with a clean, hard-driven shot that sizzled right through Wandel's high guard and stopped with a jarring impact between his eyes.

A new savage fury surged within him, and he bored into Barnes with every ounce of energy he could muster. Barnes, himself dazed, closed his guard and gave ground. He was driven smashing against the wall, and his head smacked soundly against the hard surface. His senses reeled, and he saw Wandel through a haze. He let fly with a terrific right that missed its mark, and Wandel, tottering for a moment, threw his whole weight behind a blow that connected with Barnes' jaw and snapped his head back against the wall with another brain-numbing thud.

Wandel sagged back, groping for his balance. Barnes, unable to see clearly, reeled sidewise and toppled to the floor. He groaned and rolled over. Pain stabbed through his head. Spots danced before his eyes, blinding him. All strength seemed to have deserted him for the time being.

Wandel, dripping blood, steered a crooked course for the door, turned the key and fell back as the crowd surged in. He leaned against the wall, trying to draw his shoulders erect, trying to lift up his chin. He said huskily:

"Drag—that—guy—out."

Dolly Bodine clawed her way to his side, her eyes wide with horror, her lips quivering.

"Oh, Duke!" she cried. "What—what — Oh, my poor Duke!" She began sobbing hysterically.

Of the men who pushed into the rooms Silver Sam was the first to reach Barnes. Barnes by this time was working to his knees. Silver Sam bent to pick him up, and two sourdoughs jumped to assist him. They got Barnes to his feet and promptly rushed him toward the door.

"Everybody—get—out!" choked Wandel. "Get out!" he repeated in what was almost a panicky voice.

Muttering among themselves, throwing sidelong glances at Wandel's battered face, the men stumbled from his rooms. Then Wandel flung at Dolly:

"Close—that—"

Words failed him, but Dolly understood and ran to close and lock the door.

BELOW, in the saloon, Barnes regained his senses sufficiently to put up an argument with six men who were trying to make him sit down and take a drink.

"Damn you birds, lay off!" he ripped out. "Who said this war was over?"

"Hold on, Barnes," said Silver Sam in his low, soft voice. "Take it easy. You can just about stand on your feet. We found you on the floor and Duke standing up. It sure looks as if you were licked."

"Yeah, mister," put in one of Wandel's friends, "you was licked all right. You was down and out. Why don't you take your beatin' like a man? You was down. Why don't you admit you was licked. It takes a man, I reckon, to admit a thing like that."

Barnes turned on the man, clamping his jaw. For a long moment he just stared, and that man kind of wilted and moved back a few steps.

"Does it?" snapped Barnes. "All right, then, if you look at it that way, I was licked! Drink to Wandel! I'll pay for the drinks. I'll drink to him myself! A toast to the winner—to Duke Wandel. Pour 'em out, barkeep!"

He swerved to the bar, and a tall gaunt man edged in beside him and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Barnes," he said, "you sure are a gentleman. I like your stand. If this here is defeat in one way, I reckon it's victory in another. I'm drinking to *you,* friend."

"You're not!" clipped Barnes. "The drinks are on me, and we're drinking to Duke Wandel. Some day soon, stranger, you're going to have your way and, if you're still inclined that way then, you can drink to me. Well—drink! To Duke Wandel, owner of the Pot of Gold and the man who beat Jeff Barnes to the floor!"

A moment later he was plunging through the door and out into the street. The gaunt stranger was at his heels, and caught at his arm.

"Barnes, can I take you to your camp?" he ventured. "My name's Sedlock—"

"No thanks. Let go."

Barnes shrugged away and lunged on. He brought up short then, as he almost bowled over Ruth Hillyer. She looked up with a start, gasped, and then laid a hand on his arm.

"Come with me," she said. "Goodness, if you walk around in the cold with those cuts— Come, I say."

He somehow didn't feel like arguing any more, so he permitted her to steer him down the street and into her cabin, where she placed him in an easy-chair. She bathed his bruised face with warm water and then applied an antiseptic, and this revived in some measure his senses.

"Listen," he asked her. "Tell me what the devil are you doing in a wild town like this?"

For a moment she did not reply. Then:

"I'm in charge of the little hospital here which Mister Wandel has financed. Mister Wandel also put my brother Ted in business. They are old friends from Denver days."

"So!"

Barnes was silent for a while. He felt that this girl was entirely ignorant of the underhand work that was going on between her brother and Wandel.

"Miss Hillyer," he said finally, "do you hold anything against me for that affair in Dyea?"

"Why, no," she replied. "I later heard remarks among the men that it was Ted's fault, and that you merely took the gun away from him. I ought to apologize."

"Never mind that. But see here. I've a hunch you're going to find Dawson troublesome in the near future. My pardner and I are pulling out to stake a claim, but I'm not through with Dawson yet and certain men in it. I'll be back first chance I get, and ten to one you'll shoot me a look of scorn when I do. But, listen. If you're ever in a bad way and need a man to see you through, look me up. Well, thanks for patching me up. I'll get along."

"But wait," she interrupted, even while Barnes was buttoning his coat. "This is all mystery. Why don't you explain?—"

"I'm not in the habit," cut in Barnes, "of trying to prejudice neutrals against those whom I consider enemies."

"But—"

"Thanks for everything."

He banged out of the cabin and trudged back up Dawson's main street. His raw face still felt numb. It was lumpy with bruises. A mob of men were gathered in

front of the Pot of Gold. Some of the men, hiding safely in the crowd, raised their voices and jeered. One remarked:

"There's the cheechako thought he could trim good old Duke. Don't it give me a horse laugh!"

Another voice cut in: "Tighten your jaw, you long-eared animal!"

There were grumblings and mumblings but Barnes did not stop to argue. He gritted his teeth and strode on, and a moment later he saw Brick Jordon making a bee-line for him. Brick was grave-faced and a little out of breath.

"Hell, Jeff, where you been?" he rumbled. "I been lookin' high up and low down for you."

Barnes explained where he had been, as they headed for their camp. Then Brick said:

"Man alive, you two guys sure must ha' sailed into each other! When I dropped into the saloon lookin' for you before, there was a few fellers stickin' up for you—Luke Sedlock among 'em. Sedlock says Duke's mug is in awful shape an' bets we don't see him for a couple weeks. Duke's sensitive that way. He don't like to parade around with his mug patched up."

"Well, he can fight," replied Barnes. "He's no slouch. I've got no alibi, Brick. I was lying on the floor when the crowd broke in, and Duke was still standing. Act one is over. When Duke and I clash again dust will fly. But we've come for gold, too, Brick remember. Tomorrow we pull our freight for Forty Mile."

"That's talkin', Jeff!" was Brick's hearty agreement.

THREE weeks later Duke Wandel made his first public appearance since that fateful day. His eyes were still hard and pale. He still walked with a swagger, and still held his chin high. His face was almost healed. After a drink at the bar he crossed to one of the booths and sat down alone, lighting a fresh cigar.

Five minutes later Dolly Bodine joined him. She had nursed him to recovery, watched over him night and day.

"How are you feeling, Duke?" she asked now.

"All right," he grumbled, staring into his empty glass.

Her forehead puckered. "Duke, you—you're not—not like you used to be to me," she faltered.

He shrugged an impatient gesture.

"Duke," she went on softly, "I've played square by you. You know that, don't you? I ain't like the rest of the skirts here. I'm always lonesome when you ain't around. I—"

"For Lord's sake, forget it!" he snapped. "Cut out your moping!"

HE came to his feet and left the booth, frowning darkly. Directly opposite, Silver Sam, who sat at a card table toying with a stack of chips, tightened his lips and let his dark, fathomless eyes follow the owner of the Pot of Gold to the door. Then he looked across to the booth, saw Dolly with her face buried in her hands. He started to get up, but changed his mind and settled back with a slight shrug and a faint sigh. A strange manner of a man was this Silver Sam.

Duke Wandel walked down the street bundled in his furs. Men nodded and spoke to him, but he gave them no notice.

Wandel reached the Hillyers' cabin, knocked and was told to come in. Ruth was just putting on her furs.

"Oh, hello, Mister Wandel," she greeted amiably. "I see you're up and around."

Wandel closed the door and leaned against it, eyeing her speculatively. "You didn't seem to worry much about my condition," he said. "Haven't been around for three days."

"Well, I knew you were perfectly all right," she countered. "I've been pretty busy looking after some babies with the whooping cough, and those two partners who came in last week with pneumonia. And besides, I knew Miss Bodine was taking care of you."

"Listen," he clipped in a tone that made her look up. "I don't care a rap about that woman. I care about you. I want you, Ruth. I want you to marry me."

"Oh, that is absurd," she replied. "You see, I don't care enough for you. And I'm so busy! If you'll pardon me, I'll run along and look after some of my patients."

He blocked the door. "Listen to me. I'm sick and tired of being put off like this, and this 'mister' business gets on my nerves. I started this hospital stuff particularly for you. I supplied your brother

with money to come up here, and that money also brought you up here. I'm still paying you—."

"For taking care of your hospital!" she flashed at him.

"Dam' the hospital! I started it so that I'd be near you."

"I thought it was for the sake of humanity!"

He bit his lip. "Well, what if it was? But it was for you, too. I put your brother in business too."

"And why," she asked, "did the business suddenly close down? Ted won't tell me. You won't. I noticed, though, that it closed down the day that man named Barnes came in from Dyea. As soon as he turns up again I'll get it straight from him."

"Don't believe him!" warned Wandel. "He's a trouble maker. I'm not through with that bird yet."

"You've already said as much against him as you possibly could. Of course, he's not here to defend himself."

"He skirt out to save his hide!" snapped Wandel.

"I don't believe it!"

"You're sticking up for him, eh?"

"No. I'm sticking up for nobody. I'm only playing fair. And another thing. I'm no longer working for you. I'll start a drive for funds to keep the hospital going, buy it from you, and pay you back whatever debts I unknowingly contracted. Now please excuse me. I must see my patients."

Her clear blue eyes met his own levelly and unafraid. In them was the challenge of a courageous woman. Wandel stepped aside in perplexed indecision. Ruth pulled open the door, gave him a last biting look, and went out.

WANDEL glared at the closed door, crossed to a chair and sank into it. He was still sitting there, nursing bitter thoughts, when young Hillyer rocked in carrying more liquor under his belt than he could manage.

"Heh—hello, Duke," he hiccoughed, and reeled over to another chair.

Wandel's brows bent in a malignant scowl. "Say, you," he ground out. "Get down to brass tacks. Your sister has turned me down flat. A hell of a lot you tried to put me in right with her, you yellow swine!"

"'S the honest truth, Duke, I talked my —head off—"

"Shut up! Get me straight, boy! She'll marry me or I'll spill to the sourdoughs how you sold 'em glass for diamonds."

Hillyer sobered a trifle. "Whuh—what about yourself?" he demanded. "You was in on it."

"Can you prove it? No! Me in on it? Hell, do you think I'd bother with small change like that? But it looked big to you, a lousy thirty-dollar a week clerk! And a chance to see the world. I did it so you could bring your sister up, same as I started the stinking hospital. You can't prove I was in with you. I can say I backed you thinking the jewels were the real stuff. Who'll take your word against mine? Who? Why, you poor white-livered rat, I'm a big man in the Yukon!"

Hillyer shed his drunkeness like a cloak. His mouth gaped. Fear welled in his wide eyes, and the color flew from his face.

"Duke, you—you wouldn't do that?" he gasped.

"Wouldn't I?" snarled Wandel, showing his teeth.

He got to his feet and moved toward the door, pulling on his mittens.

"Don't forget it, kid."

Hillyer writhed in his chair, wringing his hands.

V

THE strikes on El Dorado and Bonanza creeks were heard 'round the world. Jeff Barnes and Brick Jordon had stood on a wind-swept hill and gazed at El Dorado, down its valley spotted with camps and fires and re-echoing with the ring of axes. It was, indeed, a town in itself, restless and surging with energy. Men tore nuggets from its frozen clay, and millionaires were made over night. Bonanza gave its precious yellow dust to calloused hands, to the good and bad alike, for Fate does not recognize values.

The two partners had moved on, day after day, winding their way through the trackless wilderness, hunting for signs of gold. Stakes were everywhere. Claims had been filed and staked off wherever they

went—claims that doubtless would never be worked, yet which could not be violated.

A month after Barnes' fight in Dawson found them camped near Forty Mile, waiting for a blizzard to blow itself out. Their tent stood in the lee of some spruce scrub near a creek, with drifted snow piled high about it.

The two partners were lounging in their tent near the warmth of their portable stove. They had acquired a sledge and a team, and their four dogs huddled in the lee of the tent, half buried under the mounds of snow.

"Well, Jeff, here's a month gone, our provisions goin' down, an' nothin' to show for it," said Brick, sucking moodily on his pipe.

"Don't weaken," chuckled Barnes. "We've only started. Luck will come our way some day, and we'll grab it."

"You believe a lot in luck, don't you, Jeff?"

"Brick, old brick, I do. Many a man who's won success will tell you, if he's honest, that he would not be where he is if he hadn't got the breaks. You've got to take long chances, recognize luck when you see it, and be the first to grab. Misfortune's good for the system too. It's good to get knocked down and come up again. It toughens you."

"Jeff, I reckon you got a lot o' bum breaks in your time, huh?"

"Yes, sir, Brick," nodded Barnes.

"An' you still got faith in your ideas?"

"Absolutely! It's taken me a long while to form them, and I'm sticking by them. They've been knocked cockeyed more than once, but they're still whole. I—What's that?" he asked suddenly raising an ear.

Brick looked toward the closed tent-flap, listened too. A moment later a mittened hand pulled aside the flap and then a figure swathed in fur and snow shoved in and plunged headlong at Brick's feet.

BARNES heaved up and bent over, frowning concernedly. He grabbed the stranger by the shoulders and with some effort turned him over on his back. The stranger's face was almost hidden in his parka hood, and it was covered with frost. Brick pulled back the hood and icicles crackled in his hands.

"Why, say," exclaimed Barnes softly, "it's young Hillyer!"

"Huh? The guy you—"

"The same," clipped Barnes. "Pull off his duds. He's pretty far gone."

Between them they drew off Hillyer's parka and mittens.

He *was* pretty far gone, and the partners realized it. They made hot tea and poured it between his frosted lips. When he was partly revived he began coughing, and lines of pain contorted his face.

"I reckon he's a goner, Jeff," gritted Brick.

"It looks that way, Brick. If we could get him to Forty Mile, there might be a chance."

Brick rubbed his jaw and eyed his partner bluntly. "Do you forget, Jeff, he's the guy caused you a lot of trouble?" he asked.

"Not a bit of it," shot back Barnes. But he can't fight back now, and I'm not going to leave the kid flat. He's yellow and hasn't got the guts he was born with. But I'd get no kick out of leaving him in a lurch like this."

Brick clamped his jaw and nodded understandingly.

Hillyer's eyes flickered open, darted about the tent and finally settled on Barnes. He was in pain and his eyes were dull, yet he recognized the man who had cleaned him out in Dyea and forced him out of business in Dawson.

"Well, Hillyer," said Barnes crisply, "what are you banging around this neck of the country for?"

"I—I'm dying!" whispered Hillyer hoarsely.

"Maybe," nodded Barnes. "Your arms and legs are in bad shape, and I can tell that your lungs are hard hit. We may be able to get you to Forty Mile if the blizzard lets up."

Hillyer coughed, tossing on his blankets. When he subsided he looked at Barnes and ventured:

"You're no—no friend of mine, are you, Barnes?"

"Friend of yours? I should say not!"

"But—you're a friend of my sister—Ruth—aren't you?"

"If you think you're going to get pity by dragging in your sister you're way off, Hillyer. I once told her I'd help her

if she ever needed any help, but that doesn't include you."

"Barnes, you're hard!" groaned Hillyer.

"You told me that in Dyea, and I didn't deny it. I don't deny it now."

"But listen," urged Hillyer. "Try to help Ruth. She'll need help, Barnes. Wandel—hell, he's liable to do anything to her. He wants her but she won't have him. He'll get her—if not fair, then foul."

"If she's in danger," cut in Barnes, "why aren't you with her?"

Hillyer writhed in agony, both mental and physical. "I—I couldn't buck Wandel," he choked. "I—ain't got the nerve. I'm weak, Barnes. Wandel's been goading me to get Ruth to marry him. She won't have him. Now he's threatened to expose me about the fake jewels and turn the mob on me if Ruth doesn't give in to him. I told her about it—she never knew about the crooked deal until then. She's a fighter, Barnes. I knew she wouldn't give in. She made me feel cheap. Then she said the best thing I could do was drop out of sight and hide for a while. Said she'd take care of herself."

"And you let her?" snapped Barnes.

"Y-yes."

"What'll we do, Jeff?" Brick asked.

"I know what we *ought* to do," rapped out Barnes, almost savagely.

"Yeah, me too," nodded Brick.

"But we can't!" Barnes said. "We've got to get this bird to Forty Mile and into a warm cabin where somebody can take care of him. He doesn't deserve it, but—well, it kind of goes against the grain to drop him in a drift and leave him there."

"Yeah, I understand, Jeff."

"All right. You'll take the sled and team and drive him there, Brick. I'll take a light pack and mush for Dawson."

"When the blow's over," put in Brick.

"I'm not going to wait that long," replied Barnes. "I'm starting now. She'll blow over soon. I wanted to make a strike and have something to stand on next time I crossed Wandel. But that's off just now. I'm going to go at him again like I am."

"I'll wait for you in Forty Mile, Jeff."

"Good, Brick!"

"An' Jeff, old boy, go easy."

Barnes chuckled grimly. "Watch me!"

IF Jeff Barnes was a hard man, his was the hardness of metal—of courage. He was not a mild, retiring soul. He gave free voice to his ideas, his likes, his dislikes. At times he was inclined to be loud, but he always drove his points home with conviction, and was never hollow. He lived according to his own peculiar code, and cared not whether you agreed with him or not. He was the type of man you could admire immensely or hate vastly.

He pressed along on broad snowshoes, his parka hood close about his head, his pack heaving with the motion of his shoulders. All about him cathedral spruces reared into the white cloud of the billowing, wind-harried snow. The wind was like a thing possessed. It fought frantically with the spruce tops, whistling shrilly. It bore deep dawn among the sturdy trunks, booming and crashing like thunder, wrestling mightily with the stalwart giants of the forest. It was a mad, hungry, demolishing wind—a brute of the brutish wilds—a killer.

Barnes toiled on, weaving his way through the matted forest, clawing his way across twisted windfalls, fighting grimly for every foot of ground he gained. It was about three in the afternoon that he saw, dimly, the figure of a man looming through the white clouds, head bent against the wind, shoulders sagging under a mountainous pack. He saw, too, that other men were following. Barnes slowed down and the leader, almost bumping into him, shuffled to a stop and braved the drive of the wind and snow to look up.

"Oh, hello there, Barnes!" he greeted.

Barnes squinted and saw it was Sedlock, the man who wanted to drink with him in Dawson after he had fought Duke Wandel.

"Oh, hello," replied Barnes. "Tough going, eh?"

"Yeah—some. Look here. Where you headin', friend?"

"Dawson."

Sedlock swayed closer, turning his face from the wind.

"Shucks!" he scoffed. "T' hell with Dawson. Listen! There's a creek rotten rich with dust ten miles outa Forty Mile. I got it straight from a feller useter be my pardner. He's on his way to file his claim now. We're wisin' up only them we call friends, an' gettin' a head-start on

the rush that's bound t' foller. I'm tellin' you this, Barnes, because I liked the way you went an' stood up against Duke Wandel. About face, friend, an' come with us. It's the real goods, an' before long there'll be a stampede. Come on! Get first choice!"

Barnes was suddenly thoughtful. His chance had come. He saw himself weighted with virgin gold, his fortune made, his boast that he would beat the Yukon, come true.

And then he thought of a girl alone, a golden-haired, clear-eyed girl who had led him from Front Street to her cabin, bathed and bandaged his bruises and cuts. Her weakling, cowardly brother had said she was in danger. Barnes' muscles tensed. He had promised to help her if ever she were in danger.

"Come on, get started!" urged Sedlock.

Barnes gritted his teeth, looked over the back-trail.

He turned to Sedlock. "Sory, old timer. I've got to get to Dawson."

"Shucks! Let it wait! This is the chance of a lifetime!"

"I know," agreed Barnes. "And thanks for letting me in on the secret. But I've *got* to reach Dawson. S' long. Good luck."

BARNES waved his hand and rocked off, and a few minutes later was alone with the storm. So luck had come and gone. A bitter, ironical situation. He chuckled in his grim, hard way. He cursed the storm and the country, and a mood of recklessness began to flow through his veins. He quickened his pace. His stubble of beard was coated with ice, and his breath spouted like sheets of pale smoke.

At a little past noon of the next day Barnes topped a rise and saw Dawson in the distance. He stopped and leaned against a dwarfed tree, staring at the city of mushroom shacks, rough-board halls and the legion of tents—the mad, rough, raw city in the wilderness.

Barnes swore under his breath and plunged down on the last lap to Dawson. He wanted action now. He had thrown his one big chance to the winds, and the vengeance he held for Wandel was now strong with him.

He stopped at Ruth Hillyer's cabin first. When he reached it he rapped soundly on the door. He received no answer, and listened intently. He thought he heard a muffled voice. Impatient, he knocked again.

This time he heard a cry—a woman's cry, half-stifled, he thought. He pulled his revolver and moved across to the window. It was covered with ice and he could not see inside. He heard a dull thump, and a man's voice.

"Well!" he bit off, and suddenly smashed the window with his gun.

Quickly he thrust in his head, with his revolver raised. He saw Ruth Hillyer just break away from Wandel. Her hair was disheveled, her eyes were burning, and one shoulder of her dress had been ripped away.

"As you are, Wandel!" clipped Barnes, his gun steady.

Wandel was in a crouch, his face flushed, a cold fury in his pale, hard eyes.

Ruth ran to the door and unbolted it. She looked at Wandel and pointed to the door.

"Get out!" she ordered.

"First get rid of your gun," added Barnes. "Quick, mister!"

Wandel drew his revolver and threw it on the table. Then he strode across the room and outside. Barnes left the window and met him as he came out. Wandel's eyes were hard as agate.

He was filled with murderous hatred.

"Still butting in my affairs, eh?" he droned, his chin in the air.

"I'll see you later, Wandel," said Barnes crisply. "Pretty soon one of us is going to pull out of Dawson."

"Not me," returned Wandel. "I've got business here."

"You won't have when I get through with you. Drift!"

Wandel squared his shoulders, jammed his hands into his pockets, and walked off.

Barnes turned to see Ruth at the doorway with a shawl covering her shoulders.

"Come in, please," she invited, still a little white-faced.

He entered and heaved off his pack. The girl was rearranging her hair and saying:

"Get off your parka, won't you? You're just in, and I'll make you something to eat. And I must thank you. Oh, that man! I don't know what I'm going to do."

"I'll get a bite down the street," Barnes

told her. "I heard you were in trouble and I mushed in to see what I could do."

"You heard? Who—"

"Your brother." Briefly Barnes explained how Hillyer had wandered into their camp and told them everything, and how Brick Jordon had taken him on to Forty Mile.

"And—and you did all this for us, after all the bother we've caused you?"

"For your brother, no. I'll be frank and say I can't bear the lad. But you fixed me up after that row with Wandel and I promised my help if ever the occasion arose."

"I can't blame you for your attitude toward Ted," she said. "He let himself become entangled by Wandel and wasn't strong enough to fight clear. Oh, that Duke Wandel is a monster! Somehow I must get out of Dawson. I can't bear it here any more. He just wants to drive me to the wall, make me helpless. It's terrible!"

"Listen," put in Barnes quietly. "The only way you could escape Wandel is by getting out of the North entirely. You can't do that until Spring. I've come to Dawson to square things with him. I've gambled all my life and I'm going to gamble now. If anything should happen to me, beat it to Forty Mile and look up my partner Brick Jordon. Tell him I sent you and he'll see no one harms you."

"Oh, I—I don't know what to say, really."

"Just say you trust me, and let it go at that."

"I do trust you," she hastened. "And do you remember that night in Dyea? Do you remember I said it takes a man—?"

"Yes, I remember," he nodded.

"Well, it does take a man, and you've proved it. I'm mighty proud to shake your hand. Will you let me?"

They shook, and five minutes later Barnes was striding down Front Street to get a room at the hotel.

VI

AFTER supper, he shaved and sat for a while in his room counting his money. He was down to three hundred dollars, and it was all the money he had. He sat back and smoked his pipe thoughtfully. It took him five minutes to come to a decision.

Ten minutes later he walked into the Rivoli, bought a brace of cigars and stuck one in his mouth, leaving it unlit. He sank a drink of whisky neat, threw open his furs and crossed to the gambling room and the faro layout. The lookout eyed him with a bored stare.

The dealer was breaking a new deck of cards. He was skinny and pale, and his face looked ghastly under the green eye-shade he wore. But his hands were deft, and he shuffled the cards swiftly and nonchalantly.

Barnes took chips and tried his luck gingerly. He missed on four tries and hit on the fifth. He played rapidly, and after a few more failures began to win steadily. He won so consistently, in fact, that he began to draw interest. Some men remembered him from Dyea. The dealer eyed him speculatively.

Someone remarked: "That chum's a gambler; still this is the first time he's done any gamblin' in Dawson. Funny."

Barnes heard the remark but paid no attention. He was absorbed in his game. His winnings piled up steadily, and the bank squirmed. He said nothing, looked at nobody, but stood motionless. Then he sprang a surprise by gathering up his pile and withdrawing.

"You're crazy, stranger," muttered a miner. "This here is your night."

Barnes chuckled. "You bet it's my night, old timer."

He lit his cigar, buttoned his coat and strode out of the Rivoli, much to the satisfaction of the bank and to the dumb amazement of the men who had watched him win. He walked down the street, nodded to some men who greeted him by name, and swung into the Pot of Gold carrying five thousand dollars.

The big place was packed and murky with tobacco smoke. On the way to the bar he met Dolly Bodine.

"Made a strike yet?" she asked.

"No, but I am tonight."

"How?"

"Just hang around," he said. "Dry?"

"All right."

She ordered creme de menthe and Barnes took his whisky straight.

"Duke around?" he inquired, offhand.

"What d' you want him for?"

Barnes shrugged.

"Listen, mister," she told him, "you cut picking on Duke. He's a friend of mine. I just know you're here to start another brawl. Lay off him."

"Girlie, I'm not brawling tonight. I'm out for bigger game."

"What d' you mean?"

"Hang around," he replied shortly, and strolled off.

A LITTLE later Wandel came down from his rooms above. He was freshly shaven and his slicked-down hair gleamed. He wore a blue jacket, a checkered vest and a white silk shirt. The old swagger was still part of him, and his chin stood high. He favored a couple of women with his slow, crooked smile but refused to dance or drink with them. He stood at the foot of the stairway, drawing on a large cigar, running his gaze slowly over the crowd. Then his eyes remained fixed and his teeth closed hard on his cigar.

Barnes was approaching. He elbowed his way through the gathering and in a moment stood facing the owner of the Pot of Gold.

"Well, here you are again," dragged out Wandel, displeased.

"Said I'd see you later," was Barnes' steady reply.

For a moment they regarded each other evenly.

"Well?" drawled Wandel.

Barnes said: "Well, it's this. You've beaten me with your hands once—"

Wandel tensed, and his eyes clouded at the memory of that bitter fight.

"And," pursued Barnes, "I've come to beat *you* in another way, if you've got the guts to buck me."

Wandel crossed his arms and rocked on his heels. "Yes? And what's on your mind?"

"Cards," said Barnes. "It's my night."

"Sure of that?"

"Try me."

Wandel unfolded his arms. He bared his teeth in a self-satisfied smirk and threw back his shoulders.

"Its your funeral, guy. Come on," he ground out. "What's your game?"

"Stud or draw."

"Draw's my game, then."

They got a table, got a fresh deck, stacked their chips and cut for the deal. The game began, and watchers drifted over.

For the first few hands the betting was mild. But the cards warmed, and the bets mounted steadily. The first really stiff tilt was a hand dealt by Barnes. He lost a thousand dollars on three jacks against Wandel's three queens.

Five minutes later Barnes raked in two thousand dollars on a pair of kings, and murmurs of approval rose from the watchful gathering. He followed this up with a five-hundred dollar pot which he bluffed on a pair of tens. For a while the honors were even, each man holding his own.

Then Barnes went off on one of his spectacular streaks, and more than one of the onlookers remembered the night in Dyea and spoke about it.

"Them were small stakes, then," was one remark. "If he repeats the way I seen him in Dyea he'll clean up."

Wandel tightened down to his play, his cigar dead between his lips, his hard eyes narrowed. His chips dwindled with amazing rapidity. He broke two pair to try for three of a kind, holding aces. He missed on the draw, and Barnes came through to smash him with eights over deuces. He played sharply, he bluffed, he tried every legitimate ruse he knew, but it seemed that Barnes was always one jump ahead of him.

Dolly Bodine stood behind Wandel, her hands knotted, her body rigid, her face a little pale. Near her stood Silver Sam, his hat tilted over his eyes, his gaze never leaving the play.

Wandel's face was taking on color. The muscles at either side of his mouth were hard as rocks. He had called for three different decks during the first hour, and now he called for another. But new decks didn't seem to matter. When a man has a winning streak and knows how to play it, you can't stop him with fresh cards.

At the end of the second hour Wandel was perspiring and his eyes were glassy. Steadily his wealth was flowing across the table into his opponent's hands. Then Dolly whispered:

"Give it up, Duke. You'll be wiped out."

"Mind your damned business!" he snapped.

BARNES never let up on him. He made the sky the limit, beat him at every turn, watched him hunch over and gnaw his cigar to shreds. He knew that Wandel was crumpling, and he gave no quarter. Dolly Bodine bit her rouged lips. Silver Sam was as impassive as ever. His jet eyes never flickered once.

When, at last, Wandel sat back and wiped the perspiration from his haggard face, the onlookers moved and whispered. Wandel stared at Barnes with narrowed eyes. He jerked his frayed cigar from his mouth and flung it away.

"Broke, eh?" inquired Barnes.

Wandel's fists knotted and his mouth hardened. "You think you're game, don't you?" he growled. "You think you're sitting high and pretty, eh?"

"I'm not in the humor to carry on small talk, Wandel," replied Barnes simply. "Chips talk right now."

Wandel drew in a slow breath. He leaned forward. "Get this, Barnes," he droned. "See my establishment? Look it over. The Pot of Gold, and everything in it—rum, cigars, employees—everything against your pile."

"Duke!" choked Dolly.

"Shut your trap!" he snarled. Then to Barnes: "Everything, mister, on the turn of a card. A stranger'll shuffle the deck, slap it on the table, and we'll each turn a card—you first. High card wins."

Dolly Bodine clasped her hands together and stifled a sob. A low murmur of awe trickled through the onlookers.

Barnes let a bunch of chips dribble through his fingers. He said: "You can't frighten me, Wandel. Your idea is all right by me. Just a suggestion, though. You can take this bet or leave it. I'll stack my pile against the Pot of Gold to the tune that I can beat you senseless. I can pound your head off. You hold the record around here of having beaten me once. I say you can't do it again. Wandel, I'm a better man than you are in any way you care to mention. I can beat you at cards, and I can lick you to frazzle! My pile here says I can do it!"

THERE was a chorus of "Ah's" among the gathering. Men rubbed their hands together in gleeful anticipation. None had seen that last brawl. All were eager to see these two big men clear the bar for action and sail into each other.

Wandel colored. He sat back, eying Barnes narrowly. He remembered only to well that last struggle. His face still bore scars that would never fade. He thought quickly, and no man knew what scheme was formulating in his brain. He drew himself together and leaned forward.

"Afraid to bank all you've got on the turn of a card?" he sneered.

"Rats!" snapped Barnes. "I'm just making it plain that I can knock the daylights out of you. Afraid to bank on the turn of a card? Hell, you're on the wrong track, Wandel. You can't bluff me. The cards, then!"

An old sourdough volunteered to shuffle the cards, and the two players leaned back. A fresh deck was broken for the occasion, and more newcomers crowded and shoved to get a look. The cards were well shuffled and then placed in the center of the table, and the sourdough stepped back and flung up a hand.

"Go to it," he drawled.

Barnes chuckled in his grim, hard way, reached out and flipped up the top card. It was a five of clubs. More than one in the audience groaned. Barnes sat back again, his lips firm, his eyes resting steadily on Wandel.

Then Wandel leaned forward and met that stare for a long moment. Try as he would, however, he could not see the slightest hint of fear or anxiety in those keen, unflinching blue eyes. His own gaze wavered, bent to the fateful deck. The hand he put out to turn his victory or defeat was clammy.

The place was so quiet that a sigh would have been audible. Dolly Bodine was leaning over Wandel's shoulder, her face drained of all color, her body shaking. Her hands opened and closed nervously, and it seemed that she ached to thrust out a hand and close it over Wandel's, to prevent him from turning his card.

But Wandel turned the card.

It was the *trey of hearts!*

Barnes never moved. He did not smile. He sat absolutely still and watched Wandel heave up out of his chair, his eyes shut, his mouth twisted in a hard grimace.

"Duke!" Dolly was crying, as she threw her arms about him. "Don't care,

Duke! I love you, Duke! It doesn't matter! I—"

He spun on her and flung her away with an oath. "Damn you, get away!" he roared. "Go pick up some greasy sourdough! Whoever said I loved you? Get with the rest of the dance hall skirts, where you belong!"

She shrank back, wilted, her mouth wide with horror and anguish, her hands clapped to her cheeks.

Silver Sam went for his gun, his lips tight, but somebody ripped it from his hands. Then he saw Dolly toppling and jumped to catch her. His face was terribly grim as he lifted her in his arms and carried her out of the mob.

VII

WANDEL might have passed out of the picture as a martyr to the gods of chance. He might have made his exit with his chin up and his shoulders squared. But he didn't. He was beaten, broken, and the savage animal within him, which for so long had been carefully guarded behind a pose, asserted itself.

When he left the Pot of Gold, he cursed Barnes and every man in the place. He banged out through the doors with a pack which he had gathered together in his former rooms, and went to the kennel where he kept his dogs. He lined up a ten-dog team to a big sled, and piled on his light equipage. The Indians that had been his drivers prepared to accompany him, but he cursed them back.

He drove his team through dark, unfrequented lanes to Ruth Hillyer's cabin. He saw a light in the window, and chuckled harshly in the depths of his throat. In one hand he carried a coil of rope. Cautiously he rapped on the door.

After a moment he heard Ruth's voice—"Who is there?"

"Barnes," he replied in a guarded tone.

There was a pause, and the door opened on a crack.

He drove against it with his big shoulders and sent Ruth sprawling backward across the floor. He lunged in, kicked the door shut. She tried to scramble up and get the rifle hanging on the wall.

But he grabbed her around the waist before she could reach it.

"You—you leave me go!" she stormed twisting and squirming.

"Not a bit of it, kid!" he laughed. "You're going to do as I say. I'm boss now and I'm not playing gentleman, either. I'm through with that—"

"You never were a gentleman!" she bit at him. "You have always played the part, and fooled many people."

"What if I did!" he snarled. "It's got nothing to do with that now. I'm taking you north, sweetheart—"

"Oh . . . don't!" she shuddered at the name, gritting her teeth.

"Yes, sweetheart," he repeated grinning at her discomfiture. "North, you and me—'way north. Don't like it, eh? Well, I don't care! I'm making you mine, and mine you're going to be. Got a big team outside and a nice comfortable sled. You'll get a nice joy ride. Do you get me? —*joy ride!*"

FOR a moment she did not struggle. She stood rigid in his embrace, her forehead gleaming, her eyes wide, lips pursed. She was a woman—beautiful and adorable, with all her slim, pure beauty crowned by that rare golden hair. She was a woman for whom many a man would die fighting—and gladly.

Wandel's eyes gleamed as he gazed down upon her hurt loveliness. His arms tightened about her. She knew that look in his eyes—she knew well what it forebode. She tried a woman's ruse.

"Please—please, let me go. You're mad tonight, Mr. Wandel. Think. You can't win. You'll have every man in Dawson on you. Please. And I still have some sick children to look after. I can help them because I know—"

"To hell with that!" he snapped. "You can't stall me off, my pretty. I don't fall for a line like that. I'm not green when it comes to women. I've made a fool of myself long enough because of you. But that's all over. I get what I want. I want you! You're coming with me, see? You won't have me one way, so you'll have me another!"

"Let—go! I—"

He crushed her in his big arms and smothered her with kisses. She kicked and clawed and bit at his face. He laughed brutishly, even while blood trickled down

his cheek. Her eyes were wild with fury, her lips curled in disdain and fierce contempt.

"You—dirty—rat!" she hurled at him. "There'll be somebody to make you pay for this!"

"Who—Barnes? Will he make me pay? When I get through with you—"

He twisted her arms behind her back till she cried with the pain. He wound the rope about her wrists. She fought on, and he found her difficult to handle.

"Damn you!" he snarled. He struck her a blow flush on the jaw and she groaned and went limp.

Quickly, then, he tied her hands and feet and wound a bandanna around her mouth. He took a bearskin robe from a cot and wrapped it about her. Then he blew out the light, gathered her in his arms and slipped outside and around to his waiting team.

He placed her on the sled and covered her entirely with blankets, so that no part of her was visible. He cracked his whip, snarled a command to the shaggy lead-dog, and drove off.

He drove his dogs at a mad, unreasonable gait and gave no thought to consequences. His financial downfall had shattered his reason, smashed his poise. Dawson had seen him slide from a debonair, arrogant magnate, to a brutal, savage, hard-losing roughneck.

He lunged on, using his whip again and again. He cleared Dawson and bored his way into the tangled hills. The night sky was aglow with the pale, nebulous fire of the low-hung stars. There was no wind. The trees stood tall and white and silent, cloaked with snow. The valleys were wrapped in dark shadaws.

Wandel traveled all night, while Ruth heaved and tossed on the toboggan so that finally he was forced to lash her down. He cursed and belabored his straining dogs, plowing through drifts, chopping away matted windfalls, setting a pace that would have killed most men.

At an hour past dawn he halted to spell his dogs and snatch a cold meal.

Soon he was on the prod again, lashing his dogs, weaving through a wild, desolate country. A new wind was working out of the north, with an edge like steel. It froze the breath against Wandel's face. All day he pressed on and at nightfall, staggering with weariness, he made a camp in the lee of a spruce clump.

He made a spare meal, and Ruth ate a little. She must keep her strength. She felt she would need it. For a while after the supper Wandel sat looking at her and taunting her, laughing at her discomfiture, making coarse jests.

Then he became weary and, seeing that she was securely bound, he rolled in his robes on a bed of balsam and went to sleep.

HOURS later he was awakened by the sound of Ruth crying:

"Help! Help!"

He sat up with a start. "Shut up, you fool!" he roared.

He looked around and noticed that one of his dogs was standing and sniffing the wind, which was now puffing out of the southeast. He got to his feet, his hand on his revolver. He listened, and faintly he heard the yelp of a dog come down the wind. His jaw hardened and his hand tightened over the butt of his gun. He thought he heard a sound in the thickets to his left and swiveled sharply. Then he heard the distant dog yelp again.

"Damn it!" he growled, and fell into the crouch of the hunted.

"Don't move, Duke," came a low, portentous voice from somewhere in the dark thickets.

Wandel spun around, a startled cry on his lips. A chill convulsed his body and he felt his scalp contract.

"Stay there, Duke," came the voice again. "I've got my gun on you. Drop yours. Drop it, I say, or I'll riddle you!"

Wandel's gun fell to the snow. "Silver Sam!" he bit off breathlessly.

"Yes, Duke, the same. Silver Sam. Dolly committed suicide, after the insult you handed her t' other night. You're rotten, Duke. She loved you, she did. She was a good girl until you got hold of her. Me, I always loved her, and I still love the memory of her. Makes no difference if she never loved me. But you're getting yours now, pretty soon. Keep your hands high and move three paces away from that gun. You'll get yours, Duke, you lowdown son of a sidewinder."

For a moment the voice was silent, but

presently it continued: "Lady, will you yell for help? It'll kind of give the posse something to steer by."

Ruth shouted at the top of her lungs.

"That's the stuff, lady. Don't move, Duke!"

Wandel writhed on his feet. That slow, low voice was so calm, so quiet, so deadly. It sent shivers up his spine, coming as it did from the darkness of the bush. He ached to reach down and regain his revolver, but he knew Silver Sam, and he knew Silver would not hesitate to shoot.

The yelps of the dogs grew nearer, and then Wandel's own huskies began to raise their voices. Soon the shouts of men could be heard and the crack of whips.

Suddenly the leaders loomed out of the pale gloom. A big, fur-swathed man caught sight of the camp, yelled to the others, and came on in great bounds. In a moment he was upon Wandel, gripping his arms. The man was Jeff Barnes, and his face was deadly with grimness.

"Well, Wandel, there's two dozen men behind me and they're after blood," he bit off.

Neither of them noticed an arm slip out of the nearby thicket, and a hand close over the revolver which Wandel had dropped. In a moment hand and revolver disappeared.

Then there was a deafening roar and a spurt of livid flame, and Wandel choked, ground his teeth, swayed for a moment and then crumbled to the snow.

BARNES swung back, bringing up his own gun, every muscle tense.

Silver Sam sagged out of the thickets, his revolver smoking.

"It's all right, Barnes," he said in his low voice. "He's played dirty all his life, and posses in these parts are getting so law-abiding of late that Duke would have got off easy. He handed Dolly Bodine a raw deal, and I just paid him back. I trailed him ahead of you fellers. I lost my gun falling with a drift, but I kept trailing him. I laid in that bush telling him I had a gun on him. I bluffed him into believing it, and kept him here till you come. Then I reached out for the gun I'd made him drop. Now I'm satisfied."

While the rest of the posse surged up

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Barnes crossed to Ruth and bent down.

"Oh, I hoped—I knew you'd come," she cried.

"I'm glad you did," he replied, cutting away her bonds. "I hired Ole Svensen's crack team, and the other boys fell in. I didn't know until the next morning that you were gone. I'd had a streak of luck and cleaned Wandel out of every cent including his saloon. I didn't want to tell you about it that night because it was late and I thought you'd be sleeping."

"So that was your vengeance against him? Oh, he was terrible! I shiver when I think of it."

"Well, don't think of it. Think of the future. As soon as the dogs have rested we'll head back for Dawson."

TWO weeks later Barnes was drinking at his bar in the Pot of Gold when the door banged open and a short, broad, red-bearded man rocked in.

"Well, hello, Brick!" greeted Barnes.

"Howdy, Jeff," grunted Brick, clumping up to the bar. "Boys, let's drink t' our health. Here. Lookit this." He pulled his hand from his pocket and dropped a nugget on the bar.

"Where'd you get it, Brick?"

"On our claim. I filed one for you an' me. After I packed Hillyer into Forty Mile I met Sedlock and he said he'd seen you headin' f'r Dawson but you wouldn't take the tip he give you. So I took the tip, and him and me were the first ones to stake on the creek. I just was to the Gold Commissioner's office."

"Brick, old brick, we sure have beaten the Yukon " chuckled Barnes. "Come on. The drinks are on the house."

"What you mean—house?"

'Why, say, Brick, don't you know I own this saloon?"

"You what "

Barnes explained briefly while the drinks were served.

"Sonofagun " exploded Brick. "An' I had t' miss all them fireworks You sure got some business here, Jeff."

"But I'm going to sell it, Brick," said Barnes. "It's not my game. I've got loads of money now, and I've got a buyer. The life's too soft, Brick. I want to get out on a claim and toughen up and get the thrill of yanking virgin gold from the earth. In the spring I'm going south, I expect. By the way, how did young Hillyer make out?"

'Still in Forty Mile, pullin' around." Brick raised his glass. "Here's t' you, Jeff."

"Thanks, pardner."

They downed their drinks and then Barnes said:

"Don't forget that anything here is yours as well as mine until the buyer takes it over. We're still pardners, Brick, and split two ways in everything. Have a cigar."

"Sure, Jeff. But look here. It's near dinner time. Let's go over t' the rest'rant an' put on the nose-bay."

Barnes chuckled and clapped his partner on the shoulder. "Got a better idea, Brick. You stick with me and you'll get a home-cooked dinner that you'll rave about for months to come."

And arm in arm they strode down Front Street. Men spoke to Barnes, hailed him heartily. He was the man of the hour in Dawson, and on all trails leading out of town.

At a small, snug cabin, Barnes pushed open the door, waved Brick in and followed. A table was neatly set in the center of the room, and the appetizing odor of cooking food drifted in from another room.

Barnes threw off his mackinaw and Brick followed suit. A moment later Ruth came in from the kitchen, her face radiant, her blue eyes sparkling.

Brick, always uncomfortable in the company of women, shifted from one foot to the other and glanced obliquely at the ceiling. When he saw Barnes cross the room, take hold of Ruth's hands and plant a kiss on her raised lips, he gulped, blushed, and looked for the nearest exit.

Barnes half-turned and grinned.

"Brick," he said, "I want you to meet the wife."

Brick's jaw fell. He scratched his red beard and struggled for breath. This was too much—too many surprises for one day.

"Ugh—yeah. Hello—glad to know you —Mrs. Barnes."

RED-BLADE OF JUSTICE

By CHART PITT

The Friar's knife jutted evilly from the back of murdered Bob Kerry, and Mukluck Bill made a solemn vow that some day that knife would be returned—point first.

Brant Carson hesitated in the doorway, waiting for a clear shot.

IT was night on the coastal tundras that stretch their lean miles back of Nome. The winds of the Bering were fretting their weird lament among the frost-bleached grass—and the North country was getting ready for the coming of the snows.

In a little shack on the outskirts of the town, Mukluck Bill was cooking his supper

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of flapjacks and caribou steaks. Brant Carson was reading a two-weeks' old Seattle newspaper that had come in on the *Victoria* that afternoon.

"You can't guess what I saw down town this evening?" the young man looked up from his paper. "A preacher playing *stud poker* with a bunch of roughnecks—and he was trimming them to the *queen's taste.*"

"Ah, the hell you say?" the old trapper flipped another cake and caught it in the pan. "How you come to know he was a preacher?"

"You could tell by just looking at him." The young man stopped his reading. "Then they called him the Friar."

"The hell they did?" Muckluck poked at the sizzling meat. "Did that bird happen to have red hair?"

"Well, yes—come to think about it—his hair was sort of red," Brant admitted. "But what has that got to do with it?"

"Oh, nothing." Muckluck turned back to his cooking. "But Bob Kerry and I organized the first Vigilance Committee—just to run that bird out of Alaska—ten years ago."

"Run him out, did you? What was he doing?"

"Doing?" the old trapper snorted. "There wasn't much of anything he wasn't doing. Him and his gang was robbing and murdering right and left. But that angel-faced devil was too slick—and the law couldn't get anything on him."

"Sounds interesting all right," Brant sighed, as he fumbled around among the loose sheets of the paper searching for the tail end of the piece he was reading. "Guess I came to Alaska too late to see any of the real fun."

"Don't you ever think it, son." There was a glint of fire in Muckluck Bill's eyes as he stood measuring his young partner. "If that bird is back on the Bering, there is going to be trouble—and plenty of it. He didn't come up here for his health."

Brant Carson folded his paper and stowed it away on the shelf. There wasn't going to be any time to waste reading about things that had happened over on the other side of the world. If Nome was ripe for trouble, he wanted to be hanging around handy when it started.

He looked over at the trapper. But Muckluck Bill was too busy with his cooking to pay much attention to anything else. It was supper-time, and it would take something more than the sudden advent of a bad man to make the old caribou-killer miss a meal—or have it a minute late.

The rising wind rattled at the loose window, and went scurrying off into the night. Something stirred within the young man at the sound. It was the voice of the tundra boasting; mouthing its challenge of the coming snows.

THEN the door flew open and a man lurched into the room. For a split second he stood there, with his blood-smeared hands thrust out before him—and the look of death on his graying face.

"Bob Kerry!" Muckluck gasped, as he wheeled toward the stricken man. "What has happened?"

"It was the Friar—he's been after me all the way from Frisco—trying to get hold of the treasure map—and tonight he *got* me."

Then his big body seemed to hunch together, and he slumped like a lifeless thing to the floor—and there sticking in his back was an ivory-handled knife.

The old trapper knelt beside him, and the dying man twisted his face upward in one last appeal.

"You'll have to get that map away from him Bill—it's worth a lot of money—gold they cached at time of Mud Water robbery. Paid a thousand for map—fellow all down and out on beach at Frisco—going to get you to go with me—place is marked with five willow cuttings—planted in shape of a cross—about twenty miles up on the—"

Bob Kerry shivered and his head slumped.

Muckluck Bill rose to his feet. His movements were slow; so slow that they were suggestive of a force too ponderous to be swift—too ruthless to be turned aside.

"That red devil has killed his last man," the trapper's words were as solemn as the decree of a judge—and Brant Carson knew he was listening to the Friar's death warrant.

"This was the fellow you was telling about—that—?"

"He was captain of the *Vigilantes*. Him and I came to the Bering together at the time of the *Big Strike*—partners for twenty years."

Muckluck Bill stood there above the dead body of his friend, and in his eyes was a

strange emptiness. Brant knew he was looking back to the old days when he and Bob had roamed the tundras together—and fought their way through the ruffianly gold camps of the North.

"I suppose we will have to turn him over to the marshal?" the young man began dubiously.

Mukluck shook his head.

"Bob belonged to the old days—when we carried the law on our hip." Bill seemed to be pondering the thing that had happened. "And I sort of think he would rather I'd settle this thing for him—instead of calling in a bunch of outsiders."

"What you aiming on doing—with him?"

"We'll fix him a place under the floor," the trapper was weighing his words now. "I'd sort of like to put up a stone for Bob—he ain't got nobody to look after him. But that will have to wait till I finish the business with the Friar."

Mukluck Bill reached down and removed the death blade from where the hand of the red Cain had plunged it.

"That's a good piece of steel—too good to use on a skunk," the old fellow tested the edge on a horny nail. "But I guess Bob would like it better that way."

Then Mukluck Bill turned like a flash and, in one explosive breath, he blew out the lamp. There was a soft sound in the darkness as the hunter picked up his rifle.

Brant Carson stood there straining his ears—and listening. The little heap of coals in the cooking-fire threw a vague glow about the room. But the trapper was but a vague blotch among the shadows.

All was silent as the grave. Then from the outer darkness came the soft, cat-like creep of human footsteps.

The rowdy winds came riding down the night, and their brawl-mouthed cry drowned that other sound from the outside. Then in the lull he heard it again creeping around the corner of the cabin.

It paused just outside the wall. Brant knew the prowler was listening for some sound within. He held his breath for fear of giving the alarm. The next minute there was the soft touch of fingers against the door and the faint tapping of the latch-string against the wood.

That fellow outside wasn't on any peaceful mission—and it would be anything but a peaceful reception he would get. He waited, expecting to hear the squeak of the rusty hinges—and the thud of a blow as the trapper struck him down.

But a moment later he heard the footsteps making off toward town. The prowler had changed his mind about entering the cabin of Mukluck Bill.

The old man shuffled about in the darkness, and a moment later the oil lamp sputtered into life again. Brant Carson glanced up at the window—now securely blinded by a blanket from the bed. Brant knew unpleasant work lay ahead.

An hour passed; an hour that held no thrill of adventure for the young man who sweated in the little cabin behind the blanketed window. It was a debt they were paying—the last debt one white man can pay another.

It was over at last. Bob Kerry had joined the camp of the silent hunters. He had left a legacy behind him: a legacy of gold—and a legacy of blood. The driftwood planks of the floor had been put back into place—and all trace of the tragedy had been removed. But an ivory-handled knife still stuck in the corner of the table—a warning that the dead man's partner still lived—and the old law of the North would carve to the line.

"We will have to throw that supper into us in a hurry, lad," Bill gathered up the caribou steaks and flapjacks from the fireplace. "There is no telling when we will get time to cook another hot meal."

BRANT CARSON asked no questions as he saw the old man make up the packs. It was a trail outfit he was preparing, and there was no need to ask what the meaning of it was.

For a death knife was sticking in the table—and a dead man slept beneath the floor. The wheel of time had turned backward between two suns, and it was the old days that lived again up there on the rim of the northern world. Somewhere out in the tundra night was the Red Friar, with the map of the Mud Water Eldorado in his pocket—and a wilderness death warrant hanging over his head.

The old hunter led the way into the darkness, and headed toward town. The rising wind scurried about them, and glutting

shadows bulked close to the flat land's breast. They slanted down toward the end of the street, where the black night was unbroken by even a straggling ray of lamplight.

"We better leave our outfit here—and look around a bit?" Bill suggested as he cached his pack and rifle in a clump of bushes beside the footpath. "Where was it—that you saw the Friar this evening?"

"Over at Mike's Place," Brant whispered. "But he has left there by now. He was out and killed Bob since then—probably is on his way for the gold already."

"He won't be making any sudden getaway—now that he has got the map," Mukluck summed things up in a hurry. "I know that bird of old—and he plays a game of bluff with everything he goes at—just as he does with the cards. I think we will find him there now—finishing up that game of his as though nothing had happened."

Cautiously they approached the building where reckless miners and hunters were taking their fling at the fickle Goddess of Chance. Mukluck Bill peeped in at the window: then reached a warning hand to his companion, as he slid around the corner out of sight.

"That's the Friar and his outfit over at the third table," Bill whispered. "I'm going to rush the joint—and you hold them at the door. Don't take any chances with them—plug the first man that reaches for his gat."

With painstaking care the old hunter adjusted the blue handkerchief over the lower half of his face. Then he made a careful inspection of Brant's make-up—to see that everything was right.

"Slip your holsters around well to the front—so you won't do any fumbling on the draw," the old fellow warned.

Then he flung the door open and leaped into the room—and his heavy six-guns crashed like cannons in the narrow inclosure.

"Up with them—you *tin-horns,*" he bellowed as he swung the guns in a menacing circle, and advanced toward the astonished players. "Line up there with your faces to the wall—and keep them hands high—or tomorrow you'll have a job *pushing up daisies.*"

A roar of angry voices answered his challenge. That bunch of rough-necks were too tough to be tamed by one man. Brant Carson knew Mukluck's life wasn't worth a plugged nickel unless he acted quick.

One of the gangsters over at the third table was reaching for his gun.

He drew a careful bead—and pressed the trigger. Then he too stepped into the room—and both of his guns were ready for business.

If Brant Carson had been given time to think, he might have objected to playing the highwayman's role, even for so worthy a purpose as outwitting a gang of murdering ruffians. But the old hunter had not given him time to consider; and now that he was in it he intended to carry on to the limit.

A moment ago the denizens of Mike's Place were ripe and ready for battle. But that lucky shot from the doorway had changed all that. The gun-drawing gangster flipped his empty hand upward—and the blood that dripped from his torn fingers was a warning that the masked men were in no mood for trifling.

ONE by one the players lined up with their faces to the wall. Mukluck Bill walked down the row: his heavy voice snarling its maledictions upon them.

"Belly-up a little closer there," he poked his ugly gun into one fellow's back. "This ain't a game of leap-frog you are playing."

He came to the Red Friar—and paused. With a swift motion he slipped one of his guns into its holster—and the next minute he was going through the gangster's pockets.

The Friar twisted his head toward him, and a blood-curdling oath blurted from his pious-looking lips. Mukluck rammed the big black gun into his ribs and pinned him against the wall. Then he continued with his frisking.

Brant saw a sheaf of papers come from the outlaw's pocket—and among them was one that was tattered and yellow with age—and blotched with blood that had been freshly spilled.

"Just stand where you are—and look pleasant," Bill gave them a word of good advice as he backed toward the door. Even the rough-necks of the Bering were wise

enough to take the menacing hint.

A quick step and he had gained the cover of the darkness. As they hurried toward the waiting packs, they heard the men at Mike's Place giving the alarm. A pistol cracked—and a bedlam of voices rose high-pitched in the night.

Lights flashed into darkened windows. Doors banged down the street, as the people of Nome rushed out to see what was the matter. But Mukluck Bill never quickened his pace. Brant Carson felt his nerves tingling under the strain. He knew that the whole town was pitted against them—and it would be a game of hounds and hare for them.

But his faith in the trapper did not waver. Bill was living in the glory of the old days: the days where he and Bob had played their stellar roles in the taming of the upper wilderness.

The old man caught up his pack and headed for the water-front. Back of them lay the tundra: open miles where the moss-carpet would gulp their footsteps and leave no sound behind. Over there in the marshes the odds would all be in their favor: and the Red Friar would be forced to wait until morning before he could pick up the trail.

But here on the beach-gravel, silence was out of the question. Mukluck Bill went floundering along, making more racket than a herd of stampeding caribou. It was a fool-hardy piece of bravado the old fellow was indulging in. But Brant Carson knew he was having the time of his life tonight. They were back in the days of the *first rush,* fighting for their share of the yellow gold.

It was a challenge that could not long go unanswered. There was the sound of other feet running along the beach toward them, and Brant cast an anxious glance behind him as he followed his companion through the gloom.

Then the hunter wheeled suddenly. There was a flash of flame in the darkness, and the crash of a heavy caribou-gun that sent its echoes rolling down the windy night. For the space of a heart-beat the flare of the powder lay red on the old man's face. Mukluck Bill was smiling.

The next minute he was clawing at something that lay hidden among the beach-grass. Brant leaped toward him—and his grasping fingers found the gunwale of a dory.

With a heave they sent it down across the gravel. Behind them roared the guns of the gangsters—and bullets whined their death-song in the black air overhead.

THE flood-tide swells were ripping across the mud-flats, and the winds of the Bering flung the salt-spray into their faces. It was an ugly sea tonight that was hammering the low coasts of tundraland—but uglier by far was the wrath of the men who followed behind.

A breaking swell foamed about the old dory, and the next minute they were riding the back-wash out to sea. There was the rattle of oars as the old man swung her around and nosed her into the next wave—and inch by inch they fought their way out across the mudflats.

Still the winds raved about them, and one by one the stars went out in the black skies overhead. Mukluck hoisted his sail and they went tearing through the night. The last glimmer of the Nome lights disappeared behind them. They were alone upon a wild and storm-tossed sea—and there was nothing to show them the way.

The old man laughed as he let out another reef in his canvas and went driving before the wind.

Rolling seas boiled and foamed about them, and their white crests glowed like ghostly arms in the gloom that enshrouded the world. Something cold touched Brant's cheek, and he shivered where he sat in the stern of the pitching boat.

It was a flake of snow. Winter had come to add her horror to the black-storm-inferno: winter that would cover the trail of the dead-man's gold—winter that would crush and kill in the grip of her icy jaws.

Hours passed uncounted in the black abyss of the night. Still the old dory reeled away through the broaching seas—and still Mukluck laughed as the winds screamed about them. A fear crept into Brant Carson's heart: a fear that was not born of the storm-mad Bering. Something had come over the old man since they started out. Had the death of Bob Terry twisted the fibre of his brain—and was it a mad pilot who was sailing that outlaw sea tonight?

Morning came, and Brant caught a

glimpse of the low coast-line through the flying snow. Mukluck studied the landmarks for a minute—and shifted his course for a fraction of a point.

Then once more the old hunter broke into a croaking laugh—a sound that was empty of mirth. He pointed a claw-like hand behind them, and his teeth were bared in a wolfish grin.

Brant followed the direction of his finger, and there in the flying snow was a vague shape, that came and went at the whim of the storm.

"That's the Friar," Brant gasped. "And they have been following us all night. I don't see how they managed to do it?"

"It's him all right—but he didn't do any *following*. This is a race for the Mud Water." Bill squinted off astern. "But don't go to wasting any tears on old Angel Face. That red-headed devil had that map all studied out and fixed in his mind before we held him up."

"How much farther have we got to go?" Brant fumbled with his rifle as he strained his eyes for another glimpse of the pursuing gas-boat.

"The Mud Water is just around the point," Bill fished into his pocket. "We'll take a good look at that map—and then we will tie a piece of iron to it and drop it overboard. I wouldn't want them to find that bunch of papers on me—in case we blundered on to the Marshal."

One moment Mukluck Bill was fumbling with the bunch of papers. Then a ripping oath broke upon his bearded lips.

The blood-smeared treasure-map was not there.

"Must have dropped the blamed thing—back there in Nome," Bill said with a shaky voice.

"We can't go back and look for it—it will be too late."

"Go back—hell—what would we go back for?" Mukluck slackened his sail, and let the dory drift in the heaving swells. "We'll have to let old Angel Face do the digging for us—and then go and take it away from him."

BRANT Carson looked at the old hunter and a thrill quickened the beat of his lagging blood. Mukluck had gone back to the old days—and he had taken him with him into adventure-land, where red-blooded men fought and killed for the lure of the virgin gold.

He laughed into the gale and Brant felt a surge of admiration for the other.

The pitching seas lapped at the tossing boat, and the blizzard-snows sifted their white film over them as they sat there listening. Somewhere out there in the Bering gloom, a bunch of desperate men were fighting their way toward the hidden treasure—seeking the cache of the dead-man's gold. In human blood those wretches had written their own passports to Eldorado-land—and something told Brant that in blood they would pay the price.

The icy winds shrieked at them out of the gloom, and the flying spray slashed at them as it passed. It was the wrath of the Bering: the Bering that was the *mother of storms*—and the mother of stormy sons. Then out of the belly of the blizzard came another sound—the vague sputter of a gas-boat passing to starboard.

Mukluck Bill sat with his head twisted toward it. The driving snow had coated his heavy clothing, and matted itself in his bristling beard. He looked like a ghostly mariner from some of the old-time legends: sailing his spirit-craft across the fabled seas of the *Ice Inferno*. But a patient smile was on his lips—a smile that was more bitter than a curse.

The sputtering gas-boat passed on its way behind the curtain of flying snow. Its labored coughing grew fainter and fainter, until it was but a whisper upon the wind.

Then the old man spread his canvas to the storm, and like a gray-ghost-ship they went slopping their way through the boiling seas—following the trail of a polar Cain.

The thickening snows had shut out the low shore-line. Once more they were in a world that held no north or south—where east and west met and mingled in the dizzy drift of the storm.

Then out of the smother of the blizzard came the rasping sound of a boat's anchor going over-side. Bill slackened his sail, and once more they were drifting like a chip in the trough of the tossing sea.

The old hunter slipped his belt-guns around where they would be handy. Then he reached for the oars. Carefully he swung the old craft around and inched his way through the flying snow. A moment

later he paused to listen—then motioned for Brant to take his place in the bow of the dory.

"Don't make a sound," he whispered. "A noise will carry a long ways on this wind."

Then Mukluck Bill lifted a warning hand. From up ahead came the splash of a boat that was being lowered.

"They are going ashore," Bill grinned. "After a bit we will nose in toward them —and you make the painter fast to the anchor-line. But don't let her bump against them—till I get on board."

Once more the dory went creeping forward—and soon the gas-boat showed like a gray, misshapen ghost through the shifting screen of the snow. She was riding at anchor—with her bows toward them.

"It's the *Sea Crow,*" Bill passed the word to his young friend. "They went and stole her off Siwash Joe—the dirty crooks."

The next minute they were alongside, and Brant was busy making fast to the anchor-line. He turned to hold the dory off from bumping the gas-boat, while Mukluck got aboard. But the old fire-eater was scrambling over the rail—and Carson followed close behind.

The deck of the *Sea Crow* was deserted. If an *anchor watch* had been left aboard, they had taken refuge in the cabin and were snuggling away from the storm. Bill crept forward and crouched close to the wall. Brant took a position close to the corner of the wheel-house, and waited for the next act in the old-fashioned gold-camp drama which Mukluck was trying to stage amid the alien trappings of modern civilization.

THERE was a bump alongside, where the dory had swung around and was hammering against the planking of the *Sea Crow.* Bill lifted his pistol over his head, and leaned forward.

The door flew open, and a hulking form lurched out upon deck. Mukluck leaped toward him, and the heavy gun came down in a crashing blow. The stricken gangster crumpled like a broken egg-shell, and slumped down in a motionless heap beside the wall.

The next minute the old hunter was clawing his way into the cabin, and his voice was lifted into a menacing snarl.

"Up with them—you yellow dog—stick 'em high."

Brant Carson crowded in behind him. A second startled gangster was backed up in the corner behind the table—and his hands were pawing toward the ceiling.

"Get his gun," Mukluck ordered.

Brant stepped forward and relieved the outlaw of his weapons. Trussing him up, they carried him to the fish-hold, and threw him in on a pile of old canvas. The other gangster was fixed up safe, and stowed away in the wheel-house bunk.

"Guess there is nothing more we can do around here," the old man led the way to the rail. "We might as well go ashore —and sort of look things over while the trail is fresh."

The Bering was drumming her surf along the low shores, when Mukluck Bill nosed the old dory in through the surf, and rode the top of a high wave in to the land. They dragged the boat farther up the beach, and started out through the blizzard to locate the trail of the murderous Friar.

"There they went—and they took a sled with them," the old hunter pointed to the tell-tale tracks in the snow. "We'll have to keep close behind them—or the trail will be drifted out—with all this wind blowing."

The blizzard was shrilling its icy song above the tundra when the two treasure-hunters set out from the coast. It was the trail of the yellow gold—but a blood-debt was waiting to be paid at the end of the Eldorado-road.

Noon came and went amid the flying snow. Still they tramped on through the drifts, gnawing their dried caribou-meat as they marched. Mukluck Bill was in the lead: now quickening his pace a bit —now lagging a little slower, whenever the thinning snow in the sled-tracks warned him they were getting too near the outlaws.

The day waned, and a new shadow crept in through the blizzard-gloom. It was the coming of the night, but still the trail ran out across the snows—and Eldorado-Land was only a vague mirage, over somewhere in the back of beyond.

Then Mukluck Bill staggered back, and

turned a strained face toward his companion.

Over the whine of the storm had come an alien sound — like the tapping of a ghostly hammer up ahead—three swift measured strokes—then was silent again.

"Now what do you think them fools are up to now?" the trapper whispered. "Three pistol-shots might mean a signal to somebody—but who in hell would they be wig-wagging to out there in the blizzard?"

"We'll have to go careful from now on," Brant cautioned. "We have got to take them by surprise—it's our only chance."

"Chance hell," Mukluck snorted as he floundered down the trail. "There's only four of them, ain't there?"

Minutes passed. The young man realized that they were within touching-distance of the golden Eldorado—within touching-distance of death. But Mukluck had flung caution to the winds, and was hunting trouble with all the zest of the old days.

Then Brant clutched at his gun. Up ahead three black shapes showed against the gray sweep of the snowfields. It was the outlaws at last.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Mukluck broke into a disgusted protest, as he strode forward.

THE next minute he was bending over a huddled form that lay twisted among the drifts. Close beside lay two other gruesome shapes.

"There is the three shots we heard back there," the trapper nodded toward the dead man. "Wasn't gold enough to go around."

"How could he pull off a thing like that —kill the three of them—before they had a chance to get their guns?"

"That was easy—for a man like the Friar," Mukluck spit out the words. "He waited till they were busy lashing on the treasure—*then he shot them in the back.*"

"Where do you suppose he is heading for—seems to be going inland?"

"There is a string of timber up ahead —and an old cabin that Frenchy La Bow built during the *first rush*—guess he is figuring on camping there tonight. He is going to have company before morning —going to—"

Mukluck Bill laid a warning hand on his companion's arm, and pointed to a skulking shadow that showed against the vague light of the snow.

"It don't take the wolves long to spot a thing like this," the old man said as he turned away — following the sled-tracks through the deepening night.

The blizzard slackened and died. The clouds parted, and a sweep of frosty stars showed in the black sky overhead. Gusty little winds prowled along in the wake of the storm: mournful-mouthed breezes that whined their dismal measures over the empty snowfields.

The aurora lifted its weird arms along the northern sky-line: and behind them rose the snarling medley of the wolves fighting over their feast.

"Take her easy there, old-timers," Mukluck looked back over his shoulder. "There will be more meat in the tundra before morning."

Brant Carson had come to the northland in search of adventure—in search of the romance and glory of the old days. But there was something about this hunter of the north that chilled his blood with its ruthlessness. Mukluck Bill never did things by halves. He had started out on the trail that led back to the old days—and he was going to the end.

He turned around and laid a hand on Carson's shoulder, and his voice was lowered to a whisper.

"Over there is Frenchy's cabin—and I smell smoke," he warned. "You stay here and keep a lookout—and I'll go on ahead."

"I'll go with you—you'll need me."

"No you don't," the trapper pushed him back. "We'll split the gold fifty-fifty—but you ain't in on this at all. This business is between the Friar and me. Bob wouldn't like it to have a stranger paying his debts. He came to me when he was in trouble—and it's up to me to do the paying."

Brant Carson did not try to argue with him. He felt a new admiration for the old man. Mukluck Bill was something more than a treasure-hunting son of the tundra. His creeds might be crude and clumsy, like that big, broad land of which he was a part—but they were honest to the core.

The old hunter had a right to settle his

account with the outlaw—man for man. But he was going to be there in the background, waiting to play his part if needed.

The fresh fallen snow was like a carpet beneath their feet. There was no sound as they crept forward. The squat-built cabin was visible now against the low bow of the aurora. A minute more and the battle of the Mud Water would be on.

They crawled up under the open window where a stream of red firelight splashed out across the snow. Mukluck peeped into the cabin—then slid around to the door.

Brant Carson lifted his eyes above the level of the sill, and looked into the room. The Red Friar was down on his knees in front of the fire, pawing over a heap of yellow nuggets, and the light of madness was in his eyes.

He saw the door swing slowly open—and caught a glimpse of Mukluck's shoulder in the widening crack.

Still the mad Cain played on with his golden toys: dribbling the glittering treasure through his eager fingers. His body dropped into an animal-like crouch, and he muttered a throaty laugh above his ill-gotten hoard.

Then an arm reached into the room. Something flashed in the firelight, and a heavy hunting-knife drove down into the heap of golden nuggets—and stood there quivering beside the outlaw's hand.

FOR a split-second the Friar stared at it—while his fingers still trinkled their golden treasure upon the floor.

Then he sprang upward, turning in mid-air like a leaping cat—and in his hand was the knife.

The door opened and closed like the winking of an eye—and Mukluck stood there holding the ivory-handled *blade of death.*

With a snarl of rage the outlaw was upon him. Like a madman he slashed and cut at his white-haired foe—and the play of his arm was too swift for the eye to follow.

Again and again the murderous blade stabbed at Mukluck's heart. But always there was the rasp of steel against steel—and still the fight went on.

Mukluck tripped, went down, stunned by the jarring fall. The Red Friar sank to his knees, laughed evilly, lifted his knife to strike. Brant Carson hesitated in the doorway, waiting for a clear shot—and Mukluck Bill twisted desperately to his feet again.

Brant Carson watched them as they milled about in the shifting firelight—snarling their hate into each other's face as they tramped out their circle-march of death. Under their feet the golden nuggets glittered, and the dying embers sprinkled the fire-blood over their swaying forms.

He realized that it was a pair of master knife-fighters who were waging their last battle there in the shadow-glutted cabin beside the Mud Water.

Brant lifted the pistol. It was time for him to take a hand. He dare not wait a minute longer. The next lunge might find its way to the trapper's heart.

Then the Red Friar shot a glance toward the window—and their eyes met above the snow-coated sill. Like the leap of a panther the outlaw sprang backward—to the far corner of the room. He turned and clutched at the pistol that was hanging on the wall.

Then Mukluck's arms shot out. There was the flash of firelight on flying steel—and a snarling oath that died half-formed upon the outlaw's lips.

Brant Carson rushed for the door, and clawed himself into the room. Mukluck Bill stood ankle-deep in the tumbled treasure. But his eyes were fixed upon a form that lay sprawled out upon the floor—and the firelight danced and flickered over an ivory-handled knife that was buried hilt-deep in the outlaw's chest.

Brant Carson turned his face away from the gruesome picture—turned it away from the glittering treasure that strewed the floor. He leaned against the door and stared out into the empty spaces—where a wolf's far call shivered amid the silences.

Out there under the flaming stars the tundra-winds were whimpering—and the law of the North was a clean, white law that followed and followed—and never grew too old to kill.

Ballard fired instinctively—while Klunok whirled to face the Mounties.

Buckskin Loot for Lobo-Men

A powerful book-length novel of wilderness men.

By KENNETH GILBERT

Tom Ballard trekked deeper into the dread domain of Klunok the Killer, searching for the renegade kidnappers of lovely Sheila Morrison. Unhesitatingly, he walked into the Nesigak trap—knowing his first false step would spring the jaws of death.

THERE was a chill threat in the air. Each day the setting sun was curiously ringed with almost imperceptible circles of light—the sun-dogs which, in the northland during the fall and winter, portend a dropping of the temperature, a storm, a severe blizzard. It is nature's way of warning man that the leniency which she has shown him during the summer, with its long hot days and its nights which are not dark but are like softest twilight, is about to end, and that the land is to be given over to the rule of the elements, the cruel northwind, the spectral white death of the blizzard, and the penetrating frost which seeks ever to kill by striking deeply to the heart of all living things.

Winter!

Man is reckless during the Spring and Summer, running his traps and digging his gold. In the Fall, man becomes less foolhardy, and begins to think of the days that lie ahead.

Therefore, when nature paints the sun-dogs on the western sky, man hopes for

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the best but prepares for the worst. When the sun-dogs blaze, he must hurry his tasks if he is to be finished before winter clamps down.

So there was chill threat in the air. But it was no more chill than the eyes of Klunok, the breed, as he glimpsed beside the creek which fed into the turbulent Nesigak, the bent form of a white man "panning" a gravelbar for gold. Klunok sank down behind a clump of saskatoon, and poked his rifle through the brush, until the gold-beaded foresight, crotched in the rear leaf, stood outlined against the white man's flannel-shirted back. Then Klunok's left eye closed, as he squinted with the right along the barrel; slowly, his right forefinger whitened as it pressed the trigger.

For Klunok, who was under the protection of the Saghalie of the Skies, being murderously insane, had long since vowed that never would the Upper Nesigak be shared with white man or red. Klunok regarded the land as belonging to him alone, a gift from the Almighty. Here he roamed at will, a monarch owing allegiance to no man. The moose, the bear, the beaver, and others of the wild kindred, were his subjects who acknowledged him as king, and respected his rule of fear. Over them he held the power of life and death.

And the gold in the streams, the precious metal which the white men ever sought —that belonged to Klunok, too. True, he cared nothing for it; the stuff was of less value to him than a handful of dried moose-meat, but he was determined that no white man should carry it away and enjoy it. Because Klunok was a killer who had foresworn the human race, he was forever barred from enjoying such pleasures as man had evolved.

The companionship of other human beings, the white man's whisky and the joyous exhilaration which it brought; the civilized food which he had not tasted in years —these things Klunok craved. Gold would have magically put all his desires within reach had he not been an outlaw. Gold would buy these desired things for white men, which was the reason venturous prospectors sometimes came into the Upper Nesigak country. But Klunok could not have them, and the gold of his streams would not be used to buy them for white men.

For a second he hesitated, with his trigger-finger taut, so that the slightest increase of pressure would cause the short-barreled carbine to belch flame and death.

THE first man Klunok had killed was an Indian; that was back in the Liard village where Klunok had lived until he had become an outlaw. It was this killing which had sent him into the wilds a hunted man; and by reason of the fact that he was himself a child of nature who could surpass in cunning even the most crafty of the wild creatures, he found himself at home in this rugged wilderness. Nor had the Mounted Police who had been dispatched to find him, once the murder had become known, ever trailed him to his lair. Yet they were persistent, those Mounties, and month after month and year after year, in the season when the Upper Nesigak was accessible, they kept patiently at the task of running him down. But although Klunok might be insane his woodcraft was faultless, and therefore he managed to evade the red-coated upholders of the law.

Since the day he had fled into the wilderness, he had killed other men, mostly prospectors, who, unaware of the savage overlord of the Upper Nesigak, had innocently invaded his territory. Now and then, too, Klunok killed an Indian, for there were many beaver in his domain and their pelts were coveted by the red trappers. These were invariably natives who had ignored the warning signs which Klunok had left along the trails—a grinning skull of a wolf or a wolverine lying there in the path with jaws opened warningly—or perhaps a couple of rude arrows stuck on a bush indicating that whosoever came along the trail must turn back.

Ammunition—his gun was a 30-30, the caliber of weapon most generally in use in the north—was more precious to him than all the gold in the Cassiar. He replenished his stock only when he killed a man and found that the latter's gun was the same caliber as his own. The weapons of his victims he invariably broke across a stone and threw into the river, for he regarded them as bewitched. Therefore, while he shot down with his rifle the hu-

man victims who came his way, for hunting game he used a bow and arrow in order to conserve cartridges for his carbine.

He had but one companion, did Klunok, a partly-tame wolf which he had captured when it was a cub, by digging out a den and killing the other pups and the mother. The beast served him much as a dog might have done, yet it never barked and never displayed any affection. Nor did it follow Klunok about, as would a dog; instead, it disappeared for hours at a time, and frequently it was gone all night. At dawn, however, Talapus, as Klunok called the wolf, would return, and softly enter the doorless shack.

Likewise, the wolf seemed to have learned that Klunok wanted no strangers in the country, for there were times when it would appear at the shack, go up to Klunok and make a peculiar sound in its throat. By this token, Klunok knew that the wolf had discovered a stranger, and straightway the Indian killer would take the carbine and follow Talapus back to the point where the trespasser had been seen. Thereupon, Klunok would add another nick to the stock of his rifle, by which he kept count of the men he had slain; he would rifle the stranger's outfit, taking only ammunition, however.

After that, Klunok would go on, leaving his victim presumably to the wolf. Passing that way a day or so later, Klunok would observe only a few scattered bones to mark the spot where the murder had been committed. Whether this evidence of a gruesome feast was the work of Talapus or of other wolves, Klunok neither knew nor cared.

So the crazed Indian maintained his evil reign in the upper Nesigak, and steadily white prospectors and Indian trappers disappeared. Nor could the Mounties, search though they did, find clue to the actual whereabouts of the murderer. Now with another victim skilfully stalked, Klunok sighted his carbine and held his breath that his aim might be steadier.

Back in the woods a hundred yards, Talapus, the wolf, waited. He liked not the sound of firearms, and always he preferred to come up after the killing was done.

But although the white prospector down there by the creek was at that moment on the verge of eternity, Klunok did not press the trigger. Almost in the very act of it, he slowly lowered the rifle, an expression of wonder, not unmixed with fear, on his face. For he had just glimpsed three other human beings!

THEY were not more than five hundred yards away, following a trail which led along the creek. Two men—and a woman! All three were white.

One man was a veritable giant. From that distance, Klunok could make out the man's features clearly. They were dark, evil, saturnine, and there was in the attitude of the man something furtive and slinking. The stranger had rested his gun, butt downward on the ground, while he glanced about, as though reconnoitering before going farther down the trail. The second man was more slightly-built. He, too, was armed, and there was about him the same air of furtiveness which marked the big man.

The girl, Klunok observed, was of the type that white men regard as beautiful, although the Indian had his own ideas as to what constituted comeliness. She was fair-skinned, even-featured, and her attitude at this moment was one of despondency. There was a droop to her shoulders, and her cheeks were stained as though she might have been crying. The keen eyes of the Indian revealed all this, details which could not have been picked out by an ordinary man at that distance.

Suddenly the big man in front observed the prospector down beside the creek. With a sweeping gesture he brushed both man and woman back out of sight and himself vanished, although his head reappeared immediately from behind a clump of brush. It was plain that he was puzzled and alarmed by his discovery.

As for Klunok, he had suddenly become worried himself. He could kill any one of these strangers, or the man down by the creek with a single shot. But it would take a little time and craft to kill them all. To shoot the man by the creek would betray his presence to the others hiding up there on the cliff. He debated a moment what was best to do.

Decision came to him, and something like a grim smile twisted his thin lips for a moment. He dare not risk the sound of

a gun-shot, but he still had the bow and arrows, which he always carried across his back. One by one he would kill these invaders even as he killed moose. It meant a saving of ammunition, too.

But he would have to work to closer range. Caching his rifle behind the clump of saskatoon, he slipped the bow from off his shoulders, fitted an arrow to it and began creeping forward.

II

AT that precise moment, nearly eighty miles away. Tom Ballard, factor at Liard Post, sat in the stern of his canoe, paddling steadily against the strong current of the river. It was arduous work, and sometimes the current was so strong that he was compelled to go ashore and "line" the canoe upstream. But he did it unthinkingly and uncomplainingly, for Ballard's heart was light with pleasant anticipation.

Up at McLeod, now less than three days distant, Sheila Morrison would be waiting for him. For more than a year now she had been "outside," in the States, and Ballard had not seen her. Now she had come into the northland again, not to leave it until she became his wife. Therefore, the gruelling task of driving the frail shell of his canoe against the surging waters of the swift-flowing Liard seemed as child's play. Once wedded at McLeod Landing, he would take her back to Liard Post, where they had faced danger together and where the foundation of their affection had been laid.

Despite the fact that Ballard looked the part of the veteran Northerner, he had spent scarcely two years in the Cassiar. Coming there to die, as he had been erroneously led to believe, from an insidious ailment, he had not only proved the fallacy of the doctor's theory, but he had hardened in this rugged life until he could hold his own with any man in the Arctic watershed. Cassiar Joe Gautier, that giant who had once ruled the Cassiar, had forced the issue with Ballard, and the latter had come off triumphant.

Gautier's power was broken, the man himself was in prison, and out of it Ballard had not only won Sheila Morrison, but had been given the post of factor at Liard, when he proved that he could handle the savage tribesmen who inhabited the region. Ballard loved the north, as he had loved no other part of the world he had ever seen; he was content to remain here for the rest of his days—providing that he could have Sheila Morrison to share this wild paradise with him.

That she had promised to do, within a year. She had gone "outside," but, true to her word, she was returning now. A letter brought by an Indian from far-off Telegraph Creek, had apprised Ballard of her coming. Straightway, he set out to meet her at McLeod Landing. No gallant of olden days ever went to his wooing with more joyous heart than did Tom Ballard, factor at Liard Post.

Mile after mile, his broad shoulders swung easily to the stroke, and his muscles responded tirelessly. Rounding a bend in the river at last, he caught sight of something at the edge of the river-bank which made him pause for a moment. Then, veering his craft abruptly, he drove it ashore, his curiosity aroused.

What he saw was a broken canoe, lodged there among the boulders in an eddy of the stream. It was half-filled with water, and its paddles were gone. The rocks had battered it, but on closer examination, Ballard saw something else. There were bullet-holes in many places in the hull!

He knew then that he was gazing upon the evidence of some tragedy of the northland, where tragedy ever lurks just around the corner. The wrecking of a canoe in the river was by no means an unusual thing, for the Liard is treacherous at best. But under such circumstances, the occupants of the canoe would have repaired the craft and would have gone on.

Here, however, was something more sinister. Bullet-holes meant trouble of a different sort. Involuntarily, Ballard looked around him, but saw nothing except the familiar sweep of the stream, and the ranks of spire-like spruce trees on either bank. He peered more closely at the wrecked craft there among the rocks.

Suddenly his eyes widened a little. At the bottom of the canoe, partly-covered by bits of twigs and other flotsam, was a fragment of blue ribbon!

This puzzled him, but after a moment

his mind supplied what seemed to be a logical answer. In the canoe there had been some squaw, doubtless, and to her had belonged this fragment of finery. Ballard had been startled for an instant only because he remembered that blue was the favorite color of Sheila Morrison.

Still, it was unreasonable to suppose that this bit of ribbon had any significance concerning the woman he loved. She was many miles away at this moment, she could not even have reached McLeod Landing as yet. She had written him of the approximate date on which she would leave Telegraph Creek—a date which would make it impossible for her to reach the Landing for at least three days yet. This broken canoe and the fragment of ribbon, mute reminders of disaster which had overtaken some unfortunates in this forbidding wilderness, had nothing to do with Sheila Morrison.

Ballard could evolve no theory concerning his find. The bullet-holes, however, gave the circumstance a sinister aspect. There were no other signs of tragedy, so Ballard was forced to conclude that the river held the secret; and the Liard has a way of forever keeping such secrets to itself.

At last, still puzzled by the find, Ballard pushed his canoe away from shore, and took up the easy swing of his paddle. He resolved that when he reached McLeod Landing he would report his discovery, and after that the Mounted Police might be able to unravel the mystery.

PRESENTLY, the incident was all but forgotten, for Ballard's thoughts centered on Sheila Morrison. He pictured their meeting, and how surprised she would be to learn that he was there before her. He smiled, and although his eyes were on the river ahead, they did not see it. Instead, there was conjured before them the face and form of Sheila Morrison.

Likewise, Ballard had another surprise for her. A week before he had come across a clue to the existence of a lost mine back in the Liard hills. There could be no question as to the authenticity of his information, he believed. For some time he had observed that Indians who came to the post to trade, had small nuggets. This signified nothing save that the natives had probably found these fragments of gold over a period of years in wandering along the many creeks of the region. They indicated the existence of an occasional "pocket" of the precious metal. And then, one day, an old Indian had come into the post carrying a moose-hide "poke" filled with coarse gold.

Ballard had heard of the old fellow, but never had seen him before. Old Tsumpsit was regarded by other Indians as "queer," and they feared and respected him as being under the protection of the Almighty. Tsumpsit lived many miles back in the hills, a recluse, and such articles as he needed from the post, he had other Indians obtain for him, apparently disliking the idea of associating with white men, even the lone trader at Liard.

But what Tsumpsit had in mind now called for his personal appearance. He needed many things, he explained, for he was growing old, and winter was not far away; indeed, the sun-dogs were already to be seen. Tsumpsit was no longer able to go into the hills to trap or hunt; he must depend upon the white trader for food. Therefore, he had brought this gold, which should buy new blankets and food and other necessities.

Ballard knew that here was no evidence of a mere "pocket" of gold. The nuggets which Tsumpsit had were large, very coarse, and they did not have that worn look which gold acquires after being carried around in a "poke" for years. Ballard surmised that Tsumpsit had discovered the gold very recently.

Ballard weighed the gold, and then indicated various articles which old Tsumpsit could have—a new rifle for, although Tsumpsit was very old and no longer able to hunt game, he still had the wilderness-dweller's pride in a firearm; two pairs of four-point blankets, woolen shirts, and a quantity of food. As always, Ballard treated his customers fairly, giving them the value of whatever articles they offered in trade.

BUT the old Indian was dissatisfied. He argued that his gold was worth much more than Ballard offered. Patiently, the trader insisted that he was giving full value. Still Tsumpsit argued,

but Ballard was adamant. A particularly gaudy parka of heavy wool, woven in a pattern of bright plaid, had caught his fancy. He vowed he would not leave the post until he possessed the garment.

Ballard considered. At last he said:

"I have given you full value for your gold, Tsumpsit. But, because you are an old man, and no longer active enough to hunt or trap, I will make you a present of the parka. It will be my gift to you. I shall have to pay for it myself."

Tsumpsit heard these words with surprise. Never, in all his experience, had he heard of such generosity on the part of a white trader. The thing was unbelievable. He regarded Ballard suspiciously a moment, fearing some trick, but when the factor handed over the parka, the old man melted. He clasped Ballard's hand.

"For that, Tsumpsit will make you rich," he told Ballard in the Indian jargon which the young actor at Liard Post had learned to speak fluently. "I will tell you something which I have never told another. I will tell you how you may find gold even as Tsumpsit did!"

Ballard's heart leaped. This was more than he had expected. He had been tempted to question the old man, but did not do so because he believed it to be futile. And now old Tsumpsit was offering the information gratis, merely because Ballard had been generous with him.

Came then a weird tale. For many years, old Tsumpsit had planned on visiting the country of the Upper Nesigak. But he had not done so, for one reason or another. As he grew older, and realization came to him that he was rapidly nearing the time when he could do nothing but hug the fire during the cold days, and bask in the sun when the weather was mild, the old craving to see the Upper Nesigak reasserted itself. He resolved to see the land of which he had heard much, before it was too late.

True, he realized that there was now an element of danger in the journey. He remembered that several years before, the half-breed, Klunok, who was under the special care of the Almighty, had killed a man and had fled to the country of the Nesigak. It was reported that he slew all men who ventured into his domain.

But Tsumpsit was crafty. When he was young, no one in all this region could match him for woodcraft. He could slip into the dangerous region, look his fill, and slip out again, and Klunok never would discover him.

And he had done so. Nevertheless, he asserted, solemnly, all the while he had been in there, he had a feeling that he was being watched. Yet he could see nothing, although once he glimpsed a large wolf standing on a knoll a quarter of a mile away, watching him intently. But as he looked, the wolf disappeared. Regarding the visitation of the wolf as an omen of evil, Tsumpsit had promptly put as many miles between himself and the spot as his old legs could carry him that day. And the following day he kept going, traveling as rapidly as he could. Soon he was out of the haunted region. He saw no more of the wolf, and he saw nothing of the killer, Klunok. Perhaps, Tsumpsit ventured, the wolf was really Klunok, who had assumed the form of the beast, that he might keep an eye on Tsumpsit. But that was difficult to say.

SO Tsumpsit had gone into the dread place and had come out again. Also he had found this gold in there, at the foot of a painted-rock cliff. There was much more gold to be had at the foot of the same cliff, but Tsumpsit had not tarried. Still, it would not be difficult for a strong, young man such as Ballard to go in there after it. Nevertheless, he would have to keep a sharp look-out that the crazed Klunok did not discover him.

Old Tsumpsit went out, leaving Ballard thrilled. If gold could be found there in such quantities as Tsumpsit had described, here was a chance to become rich. What a wedding present for Sheila Morrison it would be!

Better still, why should not he and Sheila venture into the Upper Nesigak country together? Spend their honeymoon in there? Together they would seek their fortune—and find it! An inspiration!

As for the stories concerning the crazed breed, Klunok, Ballard did not believe half of them. Accustomed as he was to the superstitious fears of these northern natives, he regarded these wild tales of the Upper Nesigak country as being largely

imaginative. The Nesigak was not in his territory, anyway, a mountain range separating it from the Liard watershed, and for that reason he seldom heard of it only in a roundabout way.

In any event, he believed that he could take care of himself in any circumstances which might arise. There would be a thrill in Sheila and himself, just the two of them, penetrating what to both was an unknown land, with riches as their reward. That Sheila would be delighted with the idea, there could be no question; where Ballard went, there she would go. It would be a glorious adventure.

Tom Ballard paddled on, lost in rosy dreams. If he had not been a young man who was very much in love, his northern training, comparatively brief though it had been, would have warned him that it never is wise to be self-satisfied in the wilderness. Fate, or Destiny, seems to have a peculiar way of raising one's hopes to a pinnacle, before dashing them to earth.

Yet Ballard was young. He saw the warning sun-dogs in the western sky, but they held no significance for him then. Perhaps they would mean much to some prospector or trapper caught far back in the hills with an insufficient outfit to withstand the winter storms, but to Tom Ballard they meant merely that the icy shackling of the land for six months was at hand. He was in no hurry; he had no important work to accomplish before winter came. There was still time for him to be married and, with Sheila, to take an ample outfit into the Upper Nesigak region. There they would winter in the solitudes, but they would not be lonely, for they would have each other, and that was all that mattered now.

So Ballard saw the blazing sun-dogs without fear or trepidation.

III

THAT night, in his lonely camp—Ballard lay awake for many hours, complacent as he planned his future. There was a marked coolness in the air, a decided tang which said that winter had already begun its southern advance. Ballard was grateful for the warmth of his eider-down sleeping-bag, as he lay there comfortably smoking, sometimes watching the stars which in the clear air seemed to hang close to earth, and sometimes staring moodily at the fire which seemed to visualize mind-pictures.

Above the insistent muttering of the river, there came to him a long-drawn-out, eerie wail—which he knew to be the howl of a wolf. That, in itself, was a hint of the coming winter, when the gray brethren would gather in packs in order to wage successfully the stern battle for existence during the famine season. The wolves knew full well that winter was nearing, even though the spectacle of the blazing sun-dogs was a warning not intended for them. They were guided by instinct, whereas man needed something visible to apprise him of what was coming.

Once, as Ballard lay there, he heard an odd roaring, bellowing sound, which came from back in the woods, probably from some hidden lake well away from the river. Ballard knew that it was the challenge of a bull-moose, for this was the love-moon of the antlered clan. The young man reflected whimsically that this was his own love-moon. Presently he slept.

Ordinarily, his slumber was dreamless, for he was a healthy young animal, and the life he lived was clean as the wind which sweeps down a mountainslope. Tonight, however, his slumbers were disturbed.

True, it was a more or less pleasant disturbance, for he dreamed much of Sheila Morrison; but at last he seemed to lose track of her. It seemed to him that he was in a land which he had never seen before, a sterner land than even that of the Liard—a land of precipitous cliffs, awesome canyons, rushing glacial streams, the whole surmounted by snow-capped peaks which were chill and forbidding in their immaculate white splendor. He saw much game—moose, bands of caribou, grizzlies, mountain sheep and goats—and the bed of the streams seemed to be aglint with some curiously yellow pebbles. Gold!

Yet all the time, he seemed to be conscious of some menace ever lurking near. He fancied, somehow, that he and Sheila were separated; he had lost her. Try as he would, he could not find her, nor could he discover the thing which was haunting him. What enemy could it be? Since he came into the north, he had made but one

bitter enemy, so far as he was aware. That was Cassiar Joe Gautier, the giant renegade. He wondered if it were Gautier who was haunting him. It seemed to be, yet at the same time the presence of Gautier could not wholly explain Ballard's weird sense of impending disaster. Besides, he reflected, Gautier was in prison. He could not be here. Ballard sought to explain away his own fears, but they persisted.

Fighting, fighting—always with that unseen menace. But he could not kill it; he could not even grasp it. Ominously it was closing in on him; he seemed to be battling not only for himself but for Sheila as well. Fight as he would, he was being steadily overcome. Then, abruptly, he came out of the night-mare, to find himself in a cold sweat, and with the fire burned down merely to a heap of glowing coals.

Far in the distance, he heard the wolf-call again. From a nearer point it was answered. And then a cold wind breathed down out of the hills, and he snuggled deeper in his sleeping-bag.

BEFORE dawn he was under way once more, anxious to reach McLeod Landing as quickly as possible; but as the sun rose driving away the night chill, Ballard's spirits rose with it. He swung once more into the steady paddle stroke which had already brought him such a long distance. Fears which had ridden him during the night seemed to have all but vanished, yet he could not wholly free himself of anxiety.

Darkness had fallen ere he camped again, and the following day he resumed his journey before sun-up. On the third day he reached the Landing.

The settlement itself was no more than than a huddle of cabins on the riverbank, for beyond this point the Liard was unnavigable even to skilled canoemen. From across the range where streams flow westward into the Pacific, a trail led to this side of the Arctic watershed. Going in from Telegraph Creek on the upper Stikine, Sheila Morrison would meet him here, and together they would drop down the Liard until the post where Ballard was factor was reached.

Confidently he drove his canoe ashore, pulled it up, and, ignoring a swarm of half-starved Indian dogs which almost immediately swept down upon him, struck out for the largest log building, the trading-post, where old MacTavish, the factor, would be holding forth. Ballard knew MacTavish well, for both were employed by the same big fur company. Ballard would, therefore, be glad to see MacTavish again for the old factor had been apprised of the coming of Sheila Morrison and the wedding which had been planned. MacTavish was waiting for him in the doorway of the post.

The old Scot seemed surprised on beholding the young factor from Liard Post. Behind MacTavish in the doorway stood Father Allard, the priest who was to make Ballard and Sheila Morrison man and wife.

"What brings ye here so soon?" asked old MacTavish, when the greetings were over. "And where's Sheila?"

Ballard looked puzzled.

"Sheila?" he repeated. "What do you mean, Mac? She's not due here from Telegraph Creek before tomorrow."

Old MacTavish shook his head.

"Tom," he replied, "ye're wrong. She reached here four days ago, and started down the Liard in a canoe, figuring on reaching the Liard Post before ye left, and surprisin' ye. She left word here for Father Allard, who was delayed, to follow her—plannin' that the weddin' would take place at Liard Post instead of McLeod Landing. Ye mean to say ye haven't seen her?"

Face blanched suddenly as fear clutched his heart, Ballard asked:

"She started down the Liard to meet me?"

MacTavish nodded.

"She did that," the old factor asserted. "She couldn't have missed ye on the river unless she was travelin' by night, which is unlikely. Ye dinna saw trace of her?"

Ballard shook his head.

"No trace—" he began, and then stopped as recollection leaped into his mind.

The broken canoe, bullet-riddled! Abruptly Ballard clutched MacTavish's arm.

"WHO went with her?" he demanded. "Who went with her?" he repeated, raising his voice.

"'Twas yer Indian friend, Kaska," replied the old Scot. "Kaska came up here

from Telegraph Creek, sayin' that he planned to drop in on ye at Liard Post and spend the winter. He had his outfit and canoe ready when Sheila came along. Tickled he was to see her, and when she proposed that they drop down the Liard together to reach the post before ye left, he agreed.

"Tom, what's the matter? Are ye sick?"

Ballard, who had put out his hand weakly, as though to support himself against the door-jamb, shook his head.

"No, no, not sick!" he replied. In that moment his thoughts were chaotic. That broken canoe, the bullet-holes—it could mean but one thing, that disaster in some form had overtaken the woman he loved, and likewise his friend who accompanied her, the faithful Kaska. Exalted by anticipated happiness as he had been, he was now stricken, crushed under the weight of a blow almost too tremendous to conceive. In mute agony he stood there, eyes fixed on MacTavish unseeingly, while his numbed brain sought to come to grips with the situation.

" 'Nother bit of news for ye, Tom," went on the old Scot after a moment. "Father Allard, here, brings word that the Cassiar Joe Gautier whom ye beat at his own game when ye first struck this country, has broken jail and with one of his gang, a tough lad by the name of Trayner, has struck into the wilderness. The Mounties have been hard after him, but he got clear at last without leavin' a trail to follow. 'Twould be like him to show up in this country and for that reason we've been keepin' a sharp look-out, but we've seen nothin' of him so far."

Ballard, however, made no reply. It was apparent that at the time MacTavish's words conveyed little or no intelligence to him. Ballard's thoughts were centered on but one thing, that the cruel river, treacherous always, had claimed Sheila Morrison and Kaska after some wilderness desperado, probably a renegade Liard, had fired at their canoe from ambush. Probably both had been murdered—yet that was too horrifying to believe.

"MacTavish," said Ballard suddenly, lifting his head, "I'm going back, down the river, at once! If the Mounties come here, tell them that I have gone and that they may follow me for I'm going to be hard on the heels of this mystery, whatever it is."

"I found a canoe, MacTavish, which had been wrecked, and which had bullet-holes in it. It may have belonged to Kaska—"

But he did not finish, for the old Scot had seized him by the shoulders and turned him half-around, pointing down river.

"Look!" he exclaimed. "Somethin's comin' through the woods there."

Ballard saw a weird, disheveled figure which had appeared at the edge of the clearing less than a quarter of a mile away.

"It's a man!" he said wonderingly. "A man—*why, it's Kaska, himself!*"

IV

KASKA it was that the keen eyes of Tom Ballard had discerned. Slowly he plodded on, his very attitude of weariness indicating that he was near exhaustion. But now Ballard was running toward him, calling out encouragingly, and at the sound of the young factor's voice, the old Indian stopped, stared for an instant and then waved his hand feebly, as a momentary smile lighted his features. Supporting him with a strong arm under his shoulders, Ballard led the old Indian toward the trading-post.

Kaska appeared as one who was dead, yet who still walked. His clothing was in rags, his face was gaunt from starvation, and continually he pressed one hand to his side where the caked blood on his shirt revealed a wound.

"Kaska," cried Ballard, "where is Sheila? What has happened to her?"

But old Kaska shook his head, as though for the moment he could not speak. He sank down at last on a log outside the trading-post, and closed his eyes as though trying to collect his thoughts and the exact words with which to express himself.

"Gone," he said with difficulty. "She gone. *They* take her away!"

Ballard caught him by both shoulders.

"Who took her away?" he demanded in a terrible voice. *"Who took her away, Kaska?"*

The old Indian's eyes smoldered with sudden hatred and anger as recollection flowed back to him.

"*Gautier,*" he replied, and gave the word a sibilant twist, as though pronunciation of it was distasteful to him. "Gautier—and another man; I do not know him.

"They hide behind rocks on river-bank, and shoot at canoe as it go past. I see 'em—Gautier and other man with him. Then they wound me and I fall into river. They think I drown but I get ashore. When I find canoe again, young white squaw is gone. I think maybe Gautier take her.

"Me very sick then, no can follow them. No grub, no gun. Me walk all way to McLeod Landing."

His recital finished, Kaska leaned back against the log wall of the trading-post and closed his eyes. But Father Allard and old MacTavish already were busy preparing hot water and bandages for his wound and broth to restore his depleted strength, for it was apparent that Kaska had been without food for days. Ballard helped them carry him to a bunk in MacTavish's quarters at the rear of the post; and then the young factor came outside and stood staring for a moment at the silent, swift-flowing river which slipped by the little village.

But Ballard did not see the river, although his eyes were fixed upon it. He was gripped by a nameless dread which set his faculties groping blindly for some solution. Almost it seemed that he could see before him the pleading, tearful face of Sheila Morrison, as though she were trying to convey to him a message that she was in dire danger. She was urging him to follow, and rescue her from the brutal giant who had seen the opportunity to strike a telling blow at Ballard, the man she loved, and whom Gautier regarded as his mortal enemy.

That revenge was the motive of Gautier, there could be no question. The extremes Gautier would go to in carrying out that revenge left Ballard appalled and sick at thought of it. Gautier would not stop until he had put a wound on Ballard's soul which would never heal.

THEN, came a gust of anger as Ballard felt reaction set in. Gautier was determined to hurt him more than the young factor of Liard Post even believed that he could be injured. Gautier had done this, had laid defiling hands upon Ballard's most prized possession—and for that misdeed Gautier would pay with his life!

Foes they had been from the beginning, from the very moment they had laid eyes upon each other. Yet it was Gautier who had forced the issue, kept the flame of hatred burning. Twice they met in physical combat; and the first time the honors had gone to Gautier, who had resorted to a treacherous trick. But later had come the reckoning and the two had fought it out in the wilderness, as man to man, and Ballard had triumphed.

He had triumphed, indeed, to see Gautier not only fairly beaten, but he had likewise given the giant a chance to live when the latter had forfeited his right to existence. Gautier had been taken by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, to expiate his crimes. Beaten in fair fight Gautier had been, and Ballard had never a reason to feel a twinge of conscience over the manner of the giant's defeat.

Now, however, free once more, Gautier was striking back at the man who had brought about his downfall. A foul fighter always was this giant renegade, even though nature had endowed him with strength far above that of the ordinary man. But he had overstepped himself this time.

Swiftly, then, yet as though in a dream, Ballard set about his preparations. He neither noticed nor spoke to MacTavish or Father Allard as he went over his outfit, laying in a goodly store of grub for the chase might be a long one, and Ballard would not stop until he had finished. Yet civilized food was not essential to him; for, like the Indians, he had taught himself to live on red meat alone; and among white and red in that vast wilderness the story of how he had come into the North and for weeks and months survived on a diet of red meat, even as did the natives, while he worked out his own salvation, was widely known.

FROM the shelves of MacTavish he helped himself to plenty of ammunition. Cartridges for his rifle were more of a necessity than was food itself. The hills teemed with game, and if a man ran out of grub he could still survive, providing that he had a gun and could shoot. When all was in readiness, he carried his outfit

to his canoe and pushed off with never a word of farewell to Father Allard or MacTavish, for he seemed more like a man who walks in a trance.

Had Kaska not been wounded it is probable that Ballard would have welcomed his companionship, not alone for the fact that he was a staunch ally but because of his consummate woodcraft. Kaska, however, was too weak to travel, and circumstances forbade any delay on Ballard's part. Even then, however, the old Indian protested vigorously and would have risen from his sick-bed and insisted upon accompanying his young white friend, had MacTavish allowed it. Kaska did, however, call out to Ballard that he would follow later. But apparently Ballard did not hear. After all, the feud was between Ballard and Gautier, and the young man asked for no outside help.

So it was that Tom Ballard went shooting down the Liard again, his light canoe all but leaping from the water under the impulse of each surging paddle-stroke. He was accustomed to "making time" rapidly, but never did he travel so rapidly as now. Twisting here and there through the swift current, skilfully avoiding the huge boulders which were ambushed in the flood, cleverly shooting rapids where the river roared and thundered through narrow canyons, Ballard went on.

He had no feeling of fatigue, nor apprehension that he would ever tire or need sleep. In this mood he was a mere machine, driving vindictively toward one objective; and as a machine never tires, neither would he. Deep into the wilderness had plunged Gautier and the latter's henchman, Trayner, taking with them Sheila Morrison. The odds seemed a thousand to one that in this dry season no one save the most skilful Indian trapper could ever unravel the mystery of Gautier's trail. It might, indeed, be too much for Tom Ballard, determined though he was. But he gave it no thought at this moment; he could not fail and he *would* not fail! The world was not too large nor the way too rough nor too fraught wth danger to keep him from overtaking the fleeing outlaw. The Mounties were hunting Gautier, also, but at that moment Ballard ignored the fact; rather he seemed to resent the realization that chance might cheat him of his vengeance through the recapture of Gautier by the men in scarlet-and-gold.

So he went on. Steadily from the bow of the craft a v-shaped wave split away. Nor did his pace slacken throughout the day. Night came, and with it a full moon which generously lighted his way and made it possible for him to avoid the boiling whirlpools and the breaks in the current which indicated the position of jagged-edged boulders, just below the surface. Cool it had been throughout the day, but now the chill was more pronounced; there was a frosty tang in the air. The warning of the sun-dogs had been unmistakable. Before long a blizzard would be raging over the land.

Yet Ballard was not cold, for his blood simmered with that white-hot hatred which only death of a foe can satisfy.

Hour after hour he went on. It seemed that the fates were kind to him, for no disaster in this perilous night-navigation of the river overtook him, although he was doing that which no native, no matter how skilled in handling a canoe, would dare do. Hour after hour, the moon rose higher, swung across the heavens in a great arc, and began at last to sink behind the hills. Ballard went on.

As the moon vanished, the eastern sky lightened with the false dawn. Now the breeze which swept down out of the hills and ruffled the surface of the river, had a biting chill to it, but he gave no heed. Cold and raw came the dawn, with the sun lifting a bleared eye above the horizon.

It was noon when he attained his first objective.

V

AS all enterprises must have a beginning, the thing which Ballard had first sought was the broken canoe he had seen on his up-river journey. This was precisely at the same spot as when he first glimpsed it, for it was wedged among rocks from which it could not be dislodged until a freshet lifted the level of the river. From that point on, however, he would have to unravel the mystery himself. It was with mingled emotions, therefore, that he ran his own canoe alongside the wrecked craft at last and examined it.

The bit of blue ribbon again caught his

eye, and now he retrieved the thing and held it tenderly between his fingers. It had belonged to Sheila Morrison after all, and not to some squaw! Almost it seemed to Ballard then that she had purposely left it behind as a token for him, a clue to the disaster which had overtaken her. Ballard squeezed the water from it, folded it carefully, and, tucked it into his shirt. Then, grimly, he set about his task.

Had he been more coolly calculating when Kaska had broken the dread news to him, Ballard might have saved himself valuable time and gained much information. But the blow had so dazed him that he could do no more than follow impulse in setting out to run down the enemy who had captured Sheila Morrison. Ballard had first to find out from which side Gautier and Trayner with Sheila had plunged into the wilderness. That having been done, he must strike their trail.

It was, however, comparatively easy to solve the first problem. An examination of the bullet-holes in the stern of the craft showed that the shots had been fired from the left, or north, bank of the river. This tallied exactly with what Ballard had already surmised—that Gautier was striking into the almost impregnable wilderness in the direction of the Arctic. Had Gautier gone southward he would have been more likely to have encountered the pursuing Mounties.

At the point where the canoe of Kaska and Sheila had been ambushed the river could not be forded without a boat; it was impossible for Gautier and Trayner with their prisoner to cross to the opposite side. Therefore, they had gone north.

But from what point had they started into the wilderness? That had to be determined, now. Clearly, however, it was upstream from where the canoe had been found, for the craft had probably drifted for some distance after being riddled, and Sheila taken from it. Ballard could only determine that fact by scouting along the north bank of the river going upstream. Pulling his canoe out of the water and caching it in a willow thicket, he shouldered his pack, and, with rifle at ready, started upstream.

As he moved along, his eyes scanned the shore for tracks. There were numerous signs of wild animals but of human imprints there were none. Still Ballard forged on.

He was weary and hungry, but he had no thought of sleep or food. Until he had struck the trail of Gautier there would be no letting down on the nervous tension which gripped him. Like some predatory animal hunting for sign of its prey, he kept up his endless scouting along the north bank of the river.

A mile, two miles he went on, and still there was no sign of where the actual ambuscade had taken place. Apparently the riddled canoe had drifted for some distance in the swift current, after Kaska had fallen from it and Sheila Morrison had been taken out. Still, the distance he had come after finding the craft was great and he became convinced that in some manner he had overlooked the sign for which he was seeking. He was on the point of turning back when he saw something move in the brush less than a hundred yards ahead of him.

HIS first thought was that it might be Gautier, and Ballard flattened down behind a boulder. Then he saw that the thing which had attracted his attention in the brush was a huge bear, a grizzly, which now advanced slowly, head held low to earth while its nose explored the ground for trace of food.

Doubtless this shaggy visitor had come down out of the hills when the berries had vanished, and the number of whistlers or conies, which could be dug from beneath their rocky retreats in the hillside, were too few for such an enoromous appetite as the great beast possessed. It may have been that the bear had sought the stream with the hope of finding some late run of salmon, whereupon he could gorge himself to repletion before seeking a cave high among the hills where he would spend the winter in dreamless sleep.

Grizzlies have poor eyesight at best although their sense of hearing and smell is almost uncanny, and at that distance with the wind blowing from the bear toward him, Ballard was convinced that he was not seen by the huge plantigrade. So he lay behind the rock, watching the bear out of curiosity and wondering what the beast would do.

Ballard had no fear of the bear. He

had learned to use a rifle since coming into the north, and he was confident that he could stop the beast with ease if the latter suddenly winded him and decided to charge. In any event a charge would be most unusual unless the bear was wounded. Nor was Ballard tempted to kill the beast wantonly. As food, the grizzly would be hardly palatable, and, anyway, Ballard had plenty of grub. Later he was to bless the fact that he withheld his fire, instead of deliberately shooting down the bear, which was unconsciously blocking the man's way.

For, as the great beast worked nearer the water, quartering the ground among the boulders which lined the shore of the Liard, Ballard saw the grizzly pause suddenly and sniff long and earnestly as it discovered something of extraordinary interest. Even as Ballard watched, he saw the beast undergo a change.

The long, shaggy hair about its shoulderes and neck and along its spine, half erected warningly, while a deep growl rumbled in its throat. Then the bear raised its head and with nose pointed upward, sampled the air in every direction as though seeking an answer to some puzzling question. It growled again, and sniffed at something lying on the ground. Then, after a moment, the beast moved stiffly and with vast dignity away toward the woods.

Ballard's first impression was that in some manner the bear had winded him as he lay there behind the rocks, but he knew that this was scarcely so for the wind was blowing in the wrong direction for it. With the bear gone, he got up presently and went forward with curiosity to find out what it was that had so apparently aroused anger in the beast. Between the rocks where the bear had stood he found the answer to the problem.

Three empty rifle cartridges lay there! They were of 30-30 caliber, Ballard saw; and the position of them proved that they had been fired by some rifleman half-hidden behind one of the rocks. Bending over, Ballard studied the ground, but at that point the earth was hard-packed clay and gravel which would take no footprints.

Still, he realized that he had made a real discovery; that he had obtained a clue to the thing which he sought. These empty shells had come from the gun of Gautier or Trayner and it was out there in the stream that the canoe of Kaska and Sheila had been when the outlaws had opened fire. On this hard ground and with the shells lying in the lee of the rock, Ballard realized that there had not been more than one chance in a thousand of his discovering the clue, had it not been for the infallible nose of the grizzly which had readily detected this evidence of man.

The man felt a rush of gratitude that he had not killed the bear upon first seeing it.

The next move, however, was to pick up the trail of Gautier and Trayner. With this clue which fixed the location of the ambuscade, the succeeding step should not prove difficult. Striking back farther from shore, where the ground was soft and mucky from springs which seeped down out of the side hills, Ballard began looking for tracks. And not far below the point where the empty shells had been located, he saw the signs which he had sought—the imprints of moccasined feet, the size of which indicated unmistakably that the tracks had been made by Gautier himself! There were other tracks, too—the imprints made by another man, and smaller marks left by the more dainty boots of Sheila Morrison herself!

BALLARD felt a sudden thrill of exaltation sweep over him. He was on the trail at last! True, he still had the problem of following it through the woods, but he believed that he was enough of a frontiersman to do this. Nor did it appear to be difficult in the soft ground. While the moccasins worn by the two men made little or no impression on the thick carpet of leaves which covered the ground, the heels of Sheila Morrison left well-marked indentations. Ballard set off like a wolf on the trail of game.

He held to it with uncanny skill. Leaves pressed down here, a mark of Sheila's boots, a bent twig, and once he found a small branch which had been broken. Something told him that this was the work of Sheila herself, as though she were trying to leave a clue behind for him to fol-

low. But he doubted if she could keep it up, for her acts would not go long unnoticed by Gautier or Trayner. He trembled at the thought of what the two men, angered, might do if they discovered that she was deliberately blazing a trail which could be followed by rescuers. On and on Ballard went, across one side of the great valley of the Liard and climbed a long slope, still sticking to the trail. At the top of the ridge he came out at last, and paused there to look ahead of him.

To front and to right and left as far as he could see, rose the jagged sawtooth summits of a mighty mountain range. The trail led straight toward it, and Ballard guessed that the fleeing Gautier, with Trayner and Sheila, had crossed over to the other side.

But what lay over there? What manner of country was it? A strange land to Ballard, certainly, and he glanced around to establish his compass points and endeavor to fix the location of the country in his mind.

Suddenly he started, as realization came to him. Beyond that range must be the region of the Upper Nesigak! The region which he with his bride would have explored in search of the lost mine of old Tsumpsit. The region, indeed, where ranged that storied killer, Klunok, so thoroughly feared that few men save detachments of the Mounted Police ever penetrated the place.

This was the region, then, to which Sheila Morrison had been taken! As though not exposed to enough dangers at the hands of Gautier and Trayner, she would be forced to undergo the peril of invading the domain of Klunok, the crazed Indian killer—Klunok, who guarded his gold-bearing streams from the encroachment of all men. New fear clutched at the heart of Ballard as this aspect of the situation dawned upon him.

He had no fear for himself; there was no doubt in his mind but that he could take care of himself even though pitted against Gautier, Trayner and the wily slayer of the Upper Nesigak. But Sheila Morrison was in there at their mercy and Ballard's soul turned sick at realization of it.

Nevertheless, he would go on. True, he might not come out again, but that seemed to be of small consequence now. He would have his reckoning with Gautier and Trayner, and the crazed Klunok would not stand in his way, either. The lost gold mine of old Tsumpsit was something remote from Ballard's mind at that moment.

FOR the first time, however, his hot anger, having changed from blind, impulsive action into more coldly studied yet determined efforts, Ballard bethought himself that he was not only weary but hungry. He put down his pack, got out food and ate it ravenously, without pausing long enough to build a fire. Then, unlashing his sleeping-bag, he spread it on the needle-carpeted ground in a spruce thicket. Ere he closed his eyes, however, he observed the sun about to vanish behind the western hills.

He marked the great sun-dogs about the orb. The sight of them gave him a feeling of uneasiness. A storm was at hand, and he realized that a blizzard just now would mean the end of all his hopes. It would mean that not only would the trail of Gautier be covered, but the mountain passes would be blocked until the following spring.

In the depths of the frozen wilderness the woman whom he loved would remain the helpless captive of two murderous outlaws and an equally murderous, insane Indian. The dreadful picture was almost too much for Ballard to contemplate, and he put the thought from him while he resolved to sleep for a couple of hours, and thus refreshed, press on at greater speed than ever.

In the western sky blazed the sun-dog's warning of approaching winter. Seemingly, then, there remained for Ballard but a few days—not more than a week at the outside—before he must accomplish the tremendous task to which he had dedicated himself. Not only must he match his wits and strength against murderous outlaws, but he must also overcome the element of time and the threatening forces of nature in her bitterest mood.

The sun-dogs blazed on, while Ballard slept, to awaken presently to the realization that he must answer a challenge more terrible than he had dreamed.

VI

ON that day beside the creek which emptied into the Upper Nesigak, Jim Morrison, industriously panning a gravel-bar, had paused in his labors as there came to him a premonition, a feeling of personal danger, which was imminent and pressing. It seemed to him that malevolent eyes were boring into the back of his skull, and quickly he glanced around, but saw nothing. Half-convinced that it was merely a case of his nerves playing him tricks he went back to his work.

But at the same time that feeling of uneasiness persisted. For that matter, Morrison had been more or less uneasy ever since he had ventured into the region of the Upper Nesigak. He had known full well that he was taking his life in his hands when he did so, but hope of reward was great enough to compensate for the ever-present threat of danger.

Morrison, young, and with real ambition awakened in him for the first time, wanted to make good in this Northland. He wanted to show his sister, Sheila, and also Tom Ballard, who was to be Morrison's brother-in-law, that he could succeed as well as other men. In the beginning, Morrison had made mistakes which he was now endeavoring to rectify. He had cast his lot with Cassiar Joe Gautier when that giant renegade was posing as champion of all free-traders who were fighting the great fur company. But in the end, Morrison had had his eyes opened to the true purpose behind Gautier's efforts to keep the Liard Indians in a state of rebellion; and the young man had broken with Gautier.

Then had come the historic clash between Gautier and Tom Ballard, with the latter triumphing and Gautier landing within the toils of the Mounted Police. Since that day, nearly two years ago, Ballard and Morrison had been very good friends. Indeed, Ballard had come to take on the aspect of a sort of demi-god in the eyes of Sheila's young brother. Ballard's strength and unswerving courage were qualities which the boyish Jim could admire.

So Morrison became ambitious to do something on his own behalf, something fully as daring as that which ballard had accomplished. When Morrison heard the stories of gold to be found in the Upper Nesigak and of the crazed Indian, Klunok, whom the Mounted Police could not catch, and who killed so swiftly and silently that other white prospectors feared to enter the country, the young man's imagination was fired. He wanted to do something which other men were afraid to do. Therefore, gathering himself a light outfit, and leaving no word of where he was going, he struck out for the region where gold had beckoned many to their doom.

FOR several days he roamed the region without seeing signs of Klunok or of any other man. He began to think that the stories of the Indian killer were at least greatly exaggerated if not downright lies. More, confidently, then, and with less precaution than he had taken at the beginning, he explored the country, panning the various creeks, until at last he had found one where every scoopful of black sand revealed small nuggets.

Morrison was not only elated but he was tremendously excited, for he was convinced that he had made a really great "strike." He resolved to pan out as much gold as he could in three or four days and then make for the nearest post to spread the good news. He was certain then that a stampede would follow, and, wealthy beyond his wildest dreams, he would be hailed as the discoverer of a second Klondike. Even Ballard would be compelled to regard him with a new respect, and certainly he would be a hero in the eyes of his sister.

Soon after he had begun panning the creek, he had discovered a wolf standing at the summit of a nearby hill, watching him curiously. Morrison's first impulse was to shoot the gray marauder, but he decided that this would be unwise, for the sound of the gun might attract the attention of Klunok himself. So he went about his work, and when he looked again at the hill the wolf was gone.

Strangely enough, too, with the disappearance of the wolf had vanished Morrison's feeling of uneasiness. But that feeling came back again, perhaps two hours later. Once more he was certain that somebody or something was watching him.

He looked all about but could see nothing save the gray and brown rocks, the sombre spruce trees and an occasional clump of saskatoon and willow. Half-convinced, at last, that he was merely undergoing an attack of "nerves," he continued industriously panning the gravel-bar, until a movement at the top of a rather high point on the opposite side of the creek attracted his attention.

He looked up in time to see a man vanish behind a clump of brush. Morrison was not aware, of course, that just previously Gautier and Trayner, and also Sheila, had stood out there in plain sight. The distance was, however, too great for any of them to have recognized him; he seemed to be merely a prospector; while Morrison never dreamed that the man he saw vanishing behind the brush was Gautier, and that Sheila was there, too.

Yet the discovery galvanized him into action. Jumping to his feet and casting aside the gold pan, although the nuggets he had panned were safely within a moosehide "poke" in his pocket, Morrison caught up his gun and dashed for the nearest covert. As he took a step, however, there was a sharp, whistling sound and an arrow shot through the air over the exact place where he had been standing. Had he not moved he would have been transfixed.

But there was no time to hesitate. As he ran forward and flung himself behind a great windfall another arrow whizzed by within two inches of his head.

THE thing was a puzzle to him. His first impression, when he had seen the figure of Gautier on the opposite bank, had been, of course, that it was the Indian, Klunok, who was stalking him. But these arrows came from another direction. Therefore, Kluok was on the same side of the stream as himself, and the man he had seen over there on the point was a stranger. But who? That it was Gautier, was the last thing which would have occurred to Morrison. If it were not Klunok, then it must be a white man, who, undoubtedly, would prove an ally and a friend in combating this crazed native killer.

No more arrows came, yet Morrison still had a feeling that he was being watched. The woods, however, were silent as ever, and the only sound which broke the stillness was the lazy murmuring of the nearby creek. He poked his rifle through the branches of the windfall and waited, listening.

Presently the strain of it began to wear on his nerves. He was convinced now that Klunok had actually seen him and was creeping forward like some hunting cat about to leap upon its prey. So consummate was the woodcraft of the crazed Indian that Morrison heard no sound of the stalker's approach; there was no breaking of a twig or rustle of a leaf, and of Klunok the white man could see nothing. Something, however, told Morrison that the Indian was coming closer, closer, striving for a better shot.

The boy was not without courage and, given the opportunity, he would have shot it out then and there; but the strain of waiting, waiting for something, he knew not what, was too much to bear. He knew that he would be shot down without mercy, perhaps without even glimpsing his slayer. Morrison decided to take matters into his own hands. Still keeping the windfall between himself and the point from which the arrows had come, he began backing away as rapidly as possible.

He sought to keep under cover as much as he could, yet all the while he was working toward the creek with the hope of crossing it and joining forces with the man whom he had seen on the other side. Between that unknown and Klunok, he preferred to risk his chances with the former. Undoubtedly, the stranger was as anxious to evade Klunok as he was himself. Together they might be able to hold off the Indian. So Morrison went on.

And in his progress toward the creek, he was favored largely by luck. Klunok knew that Morrison was armed and he knew, too, that the man was aroused. Therefore, Klunok did not dare expose himself. Likewise, Klunok realized that the man across the creek might open fire. So he combined the most stealthy craft in his advance toward the windfall where Morrison was supposedly hidden.

Klunok reached it at last, only to discover that his intended prey was already down by the creek. Indeed, Morrison,

appearing suddenly from behind a rock, plunged into the stream and began floundering as rapidly as possible for the opposite shore.

It was too long a bow shot for Klunok, and with an exclamation of disgust he put down the bow and arrow and picked up his rifle. But Morrison was now a hundred and fifty yards away, zigzagging wildly through the foaming waters of the creek. Klunok's first bullet sent spray in Morrison's face, and the second ripped through the young man's shirt, but without wounding him. Before Klunok could shoot again Morrison had gained the shore and was once more under cover.

Hidden in the brush, the insane Indian went into a paroxysm of rage and disappointment. Fifty or sixty feet behind him Talapus, the wolf, watched the antics of its master with curiosity. Klunok brandished his gun, and invoked the wrath of the Saghalie of the Skies upon the man who had escaped him; he mouthed horrible expletives and was seized with an epileptic fit which left him frothing. But directly this outburst passed, and once more he became the cunning, skulking killer. Backing out from behind the bush wherein he had been lying, he ran swiftly for a point where he knew that the stream could be forded easily. He would gain the opposite side and, one by one, he would shoot down these whites who had invaded his territory.

On the opposite side of the creek, still keeping under cover, Jim Morrison made his way swiftly toward the point of land where he had last seen the strange man whom he had at first believed to be Klunok. Morrison was worried, uneasy, and desired nothing so much now as to get out of this infernal region haunted by a skulking assassin. He welcomed the opportunity to join forces with the stranger, and told himself that, no matter who the man might be, he could scarcely fail to be an ally in the common warfare to be carried against the crazed Indian.

Convinced at last that he was fairly well out of range of Klunok's gun, Morrison finally broke and charged up the steep gravel-slide, toward the point where he had last seen the stranger. He reached it drew himself panting over the rim, raced for the nearest clump of brush, and flung himself out of sight. He was still lying there almost breathless from the terrific exertion of running up the face of the gravel-slide, when he heard a rustle in the brush close by him, and he looked up.

Standing there with his rifle covering him was Cassiar Joe Gautier, while behind the giant was another man, also armed. Then, there was a half-choked cry as Sheila Morrison ran forward to fling herself in her brother's arms!

VII

"JIM!" cried Sheila. "Jim! How did you ever get here?"

Young Morrison was too dazed to reply readily. He stared at her—then at the grinning, leering face of the towering Gautier, and at Trayner. Gautier, who was presumably miles away in jail, here with Sheila! The thing was incredible, unbelievable. But Sheila, evidently knowing the questions which were racing through his mind, answered them.

"This beast," she cried, pointing to Gautier, "shot poor Kaska and took me prisoner! He knows that Tom Ballard will follow, and then he'll kill Tom. But you, Jim—"

Gautier broke in with a triumphant chuckle:

"We are well met again, *mon ami!* You desert me for that pig-dog, Ballard, eh? You theenk old Cassiar Joe live forever in prison, eh? But prison no hold him. I come back to keel Ballard.

"But you, *mon ami;* I did not expect to find you here. What should I do with you? Perhaps, give you over to that crazee Indian, eh?"

Morrison did not answer at first, but he gave back boldly stare for stare with the giant who stood over him. Then Morrison got to his feet.

"I used to call you my friend, Gautier," he said after a moment, "but that was before I knew what kind of a man you are. Now you have kidnaped my sister, laid hands on her. For that, I'm going to kill you—"

He broke off to catch up his rifle, and sought to level the gun, but ere he could do so Gautier moved with the swiftness of a striking rattlesnake. True, the big

man could have shot down Morrison with ease, but he chose another method. Despite his bulk, Gautier had the litheness of a panther. He struck down Morrison's gun before it could be fired; one strong hand wrenched it from the young man's grip, while a back-hand stroke flattened him. Crying out, Sheila would have flung herself at Gautier had not Trayner seized her quickly. Gautier stood there, still smiling his supercilious smile, while he gazed at her in triumph.

"Hear me, *mon ami,*" remarked Gautier to Morrison, now struggling to his feet, "you try that again and I keel you!" Still Morrison would have taken up the gage of battle had not Sheila stopped him.

"Don't, Jim," she begged. "He'll only do as he says."

But Morrison, fighting angry, would have ignored her. Gautier broke in:

"Be warned, *mon ami!* Your sister, she is ver' wise. I like dat girl—I like her the first time I see her. If you do not try to keel me, maybe I let you live?" He smiled again.

"I think that by and by dat crazee Indian come here to keel all of us," went on Gautier. "When I look down by the creek and see you there, *mon ami,* I no believe it is you. But dat Indian see you, too.

"I tell you funny thing, *mon ami.* I know dat Indian, Klunok. Long time ago when he is leetle boy, I see him at Liard village, and he tell me some day he grow up to be big like me. Dat is before he go crazee, and keel men. Klunok he come here soon and maybe he try to keel us because he not know who I am. But I show dat Klunok dat I am better woodsman than he is. You wait here and see!"

Trayner was given Morrison's gun. Under other circumstances the weapon might have been broken and thrown away, but evidently Gautier was not averse to keeping all the firearms possible at this time. He gave Trayner a few instructions in an understone so that neither Sheila nor Morrison caught the import of the words. Then Gautier vanished into the woods.

At Trayner gruff command, Sheila and her brother were compelled to drop back out of sight in the brush. Alone he stood guard, but Morrison observed that the man kept a tree between himself and the direction up-river from which Klunok would likely approach. Of Gautier they saw nothing; the woods had swallowed him silently.

CONJECTURES raced through young Morrison's mind. Where had Gautier gone, and what did he propose to do? The actions of Trayner indicated that the outlaw companion of Gautier feared the approach of Klunok. At any instant a bullet or an arrow might come from the woods, and one of them would die. The minutes dragged on and still there was no sign of Gautier.

Suddenly from near at hand there was the slightest crackle of brush, and Trayner whirled nervously, half-throwing his rifle to his shoulder. But he lowered it again quickly, and a relieved smile showed on his face. Looking up, both Sheila and her brother involuntarily gasped.

For, standing less than twenty feet away, was Gautier himself, still triumphant as he leered down at them. And beside him was the most horrible-looking human being either of them had ever seen—Klunok himself!

In his hands the Indian grasped a short-barreled carbine, while over his left shoulder was swung a bow and a moose-bag quiver filled with arrows. He was short, squatty, indescribably dirty, and clad only in the untanned skins of wild animals. His matted hair streamed down over eyes which shone with a maniacal glare. But here was the astonishing thing; he seemed to be almost subservient to Gautier, as though, indeed, he were under the control of the giant!

Gatier's leering smiled broadened.

"You are surprised, eh," he asked. "You wonder how I can bring in Klunok when even the Mounted Police cannot find heem. It is because he remember me for long time and because I am a better woodsman as he is, I talk him even as he stalks us, and when he would shoot me, I stop him. He remember me and I show him that I am now his friend. Klunok, he is crazee, but not so crazee as he might be. Cassiar Joe handled him. *Magnifique,* eh, *mon ami?*" he concluded, addressing Morrison.

SHEILA and Morrison said nothing. The sight of Klunok was enough to make the flesh of an ordinary person crawl. He was loathsome, revolting, and he suggested the venomous deadliness of a pit viper. His glaring eyes shone with hatred and suspicion as he regarded Morrison and the girl, although he seemed to pay no attention to Trayner. Suddenly Gautier began to speak in the Liard jargon.

"It is as you see, Klunok," he remarked, as though resuming a previous conversation with the crazed Indian. "They are our prisoners.

"I could have killed you, Klunok, back there in the woods, for I am as great a hunter as you are. Or I could disarm you and give you to the Mounted Police. But I shall do neither, Klunok, for I want your help as you will want mine.

"We do not come to take your country away from you, Klunok, nor to help other white men do it. We will live here in peace with you, and we will help you keep others out of it. We, too, are at war with the Mounted Police.

"Soon there will come one other, *but he will be your enemy!* He will try to rescue this white squaw, here, and the other prisoner, who is her brother. But we shall kill him, Klunok, and then we will live together here happily in the wilderness. You shall be a king over us!"

The eyes of the Indian glittered appreciatively at this recital; it was apparent, too, that his hatred of Morrison was great. He had discovered the young man prospecting a stream and had tried to kill him, but had failed. At the same time it was apparent that Klunok was under the direct control of Gautier himself. The Indian grunted, nodded his head; it was plain that he understood.

Gautier turned to Sheila Morrison with a smile.

"You see, ma'mselle, what I can accomplish, me, Cassiar Joe Gautier," he told her proudly. "I have control this crazee Indian. For the time being he will not hurt you or your brother; but if you try to escape he will track you down. You understand, ma'mselle?"

Sheila did not reply. Yet she understood; indeed, she had understood everything which Gautier had said to Klunok, for the Liard tongue had become more or less familiar to her during the time she had spent in the north. Jim Morrison understood, too, but he likewise, made no comment.

"Klunok, here," went on Gautier triumphantly, "is hereafter one of us. You call me devil, ma'mselle; now you see that the devil has an ally, this crazee Indian!" Gautier laughed, his great frame shaking with mirth.

Then with a word to Trayner and Klunok, the big man turned and led the way into the forest, deeper into the forbidding wilderness of the Upper Nesigak. Because it was futile at that moment to struggle or rebel, Sheila and her brother followed him. Just behind them came Trayner carrying the two rifles—his own and that of Morrison. Klunok vanished in the woods, on some mission which he alone understood, but not without one more murderous look at the two prisoners.

From a nearby knoll, a wolf howled as though in disappointment. Talapus was hungry.

VIII

FROM two hours of profound slumber, Tom Ballard awoke to find darkness upon the land and a chill wind blowing over the slope where he lay. The atmosphere had turned colder, and as he sat up he felt an occasional snowflake strike his cheek.

Yet this fact would not necessarily mean that a storm was due at this time. The first threat of snow might die away and the storm be delayed for days; still, by daylight it might be snowing heavily. No matter what the outcome, however, he realized that time was pressing. Hurriedly he got out of his sleeping-bag, rolled it in a neat bundle, and then ate another snack of lunch.

It was impossible for him, of course, to follow the trail of Gautier and the others during the darkness. But he had already considered that aspect of the situation and had determined upon a plan.

That Gautier had crossed the range of mountains just ahead there could be no question. The outlaw was striking into the region of the Upper Nesigak because that wilderness was remote and inaccessible. Ballard could only go on, holding as best

he could to the general direction which Gautier had taken, and relying on the hope of picking up the trail of the outlaw when daylight came. For hours were precious and Ballard was compelled to make the most of them; he would sleep only as much as was absolutely necessary and would press on even during the night. Sooner or later he was confident that he would pick up Gautier's trail once more; and then with the chase suddenly grown hot Ballard would stick closely to the route taken by the outlaw.

It was dark, for the sky was murky and there were no stars or moon. By intuition, rather than by sight, Ballard went, on groping his way through the gloom-filled woods. He discovered, however, that he was following a well-rutted moose-trail, an ancient highway of the antlered clan, leading in the direction he wished to go. Chances were that Gautier had taken the same trail. No human being knows a rough country better than does a moose and these paths through the forest, in use for many years, are realied upon infallibly by northern travelers.

Ballard surmised that this particular trail was used by moose in working out of the river-valley and back to the heights where forage was better in the late season, and where on the high slopes and knolls the great bulls would battle for their mates during their love-moon. No doubt, this particular moose-trail led through some high pass over into the region of the Upper Nesigak. It was compartively easy to follow in spite of the darkness, and Ballard made good time.

Nevertheless, there was a strong element of danger in this forced march during the night through the woods. Moose had blazed the trail and relied upon it now, but it was also used by other wild creatures. Grizzly bears were fond of following these same trails, for it gave them easy going through the brush. There was a chance, therefore, that Ballard might come face to face with one of the great plantigrades, prowling the forest by night.

But grimly determined as Ballard was, he reckoned not the odds against him; he would keep pressing on although a hundred grizzlies barred his way. Gautier would expect that Ballard would camp during the night and the very fact that Ballard was doing no such thing might easily result in the upsetting of the outlaw's calculations.

HOUR after hour Ballard pressed on, gun in his right hand, while with his left he shielded his eyes from branches overhanging the trail. Instinctively his feet held to the well-beaten path, although he could see nothing. It was well past midnight when he came out into a little natural clearing, high up on a great hogback, and paused there for a brief rest and to take stock of the situation.

The sky was still overcast but Ballard observed with satisfaction that it was no longer spitting snow. The blizzard was holding off after that first threat. It might be days now before the storm struck, despite the warning of the blazing sun-dogs.

The night was now very still, the wind having died away, and Ballard stood there listening to the faint night sounds of the forest and wondering how Sheila was faring at this moment. Gautier had gone steadily onward, and he must be many miles away at this moment. There was a chance, however, that Gautier, surmising that Ballard would follow him quickly, would pause long enough to arrange an ambush.

But Ballard did not believe that this would be done until the outlaw had tolled him well into that wild, almost inaccessible region for which he was heading. Ballard's anger, so hot and impulsive once, had now become a cold, merciless part of his nature—a determination which would drive him on until he had overtaken his enemy. Fate might decide that the meeting between Gautier and Ballard would be too late to save Sheila, but vengeance would be exacted just the same.

Strangely enough, too, Ballard's thoughts turned to Jim Morrison. He wondered where Sheila's brother was at this moment. For months he had not heard of him. That last word that Ballard had had was that young Morrison was prospecting in the region about McLeod Landing. Ballard had become genuinely fond of the boy and had rathered admired the way in which the young man was rapidly becoming a seasoned northerner.

At the beginning, Morrison had cast his lot with Gautier, but this was before

he knew what manner of man the outlaw was. To him, Gautier had appeared at first as rather an heroic figure, fighting the big fur company. Yet Morrison had known the truth at last and had been, in a manner, grateful to Tom Ballard for the latter having saved him from the deserved fate which had overtaken Gautier and other renegades.

Just now, Jim Morrison might have been a valuable ally to Ballard, but the latter was content to play a lone game. The feud was between himself and Gautier, and the reckoning would come that way.

Still resolved to keep going as long as the moose-trail held out and he could follow it easily, Ballard hitched his pack to an easier riding position, took one step forward and then paused, as a feeling of sudden uneasiness swept him.

He stood there undecided, and unable to account for the sensation of fear. He glanced about, his rifle ready, his first thought being that he was haunted by some wild animal, but he could see nothing, and as there was no moon or star-shine to reflect light in the eyes of a wild creature, there were no tell-tale orbs to indicate the presence of a furred foe. He lifted his right foot to take another step, and hesitated again, as the warning came to him more unmistakably than ever.

The thing puzzled him greatly. But he had been long enough in the northern wilderness, since the time he and Kaska hunted together, living only on red meat from day to day as chance sent food their way, to realize that nature gives no false warning.

A COLD puff of air breathed in his face as he stood there. It seemed to come from almost at his feet. Then it was gone, and the night was breathless as before, with the darkness like a thick, velvety pall about him. But on sudden inspiration he got out a match, struck it, cupped it in his hands until his eyes could accustom themselves to the glare and then looked about him. Almost he gasped as realization of what the warning meant to him.

For, almost at his feet, was a great yawning canyon whose wall, sheer and perpendicular, dropped downward into nothingness! Had he taken one more step, he would have been certain to lose his balance and go plunging downward to his death. The puff of cold air which had come up from the bottom of the canyon had given a clue to the nature of the warning he had received. Even as horses or some other intelligent four-footed animals will pause at the brink of a precipice which they cannot see but which intuition tells them is there, so Ballard had paused just in time.

But as the match burned out and he lighted another, he saw something else, and knew it for the handiwork of Cassiar Joe Gautier. The moose-trail which Ballard had been following ran directly to the lip of the cliff, and then turned sharply at a right angle. Gautier, as though possibly suspecting that Ballard might at last decide to follow the trail during the darkness, had arranged a clever trap. At the point where the trail turned aside abruptly, somebody—and unquestionably that somebody was Gautier—had covered the beaten path with dead limbs. Thus a man, groping his way with his feet, would encounter the brush and would assume that the trail went straight on. One more step and he would have hurled himself to death.

At least Ballard realized the devilish cunning of the man against whom he was pitting wits and strength, and he realized, too, that hereafter the greatest caution would be necessary. Gautier had planned this well; he had known that Ballard was skilled enough in woodcraft to be able to follow the trail which Gautier so far had taken no pains to conceal. Gautier wanted to get Ballard into the wilderness of the Upper Nesigak, where he would have the young factor at his mercy. Therefore, Ballard went on again but more cautiously than before. He was still going when daylight came.

Then he paused briefly for a lunch, and although weariness was upon him, he resolved not to sleep until night came; for every hour of daylight would be precious in enabling him to make better time.

As the light grew stronger, his first move was to ascertain how closely he had held to Gautier's line of retreat during the night. The moose-trail was still plain enough, and it was headed toward a mountain-pass which was now visible to Ballard.

Five minutes of scouting convinced him

that thus far Gautier was also for following the beaten path, for, although many wild animals had passed that way since Gautier had trod it, Ballard made out at last there in soft and damp ground the imprints of Sheila's small boots. He knew that his campaign so far auguered well —that by traveling all night he had gained many miles on the fleeing outlaw. This thought buoyed him up—made him forget his weariness. After finishing a cold lunch, he struck out again.

Higher and higher into the mountains he went, while the overcast sky softened as rifts in the leaden grayness appeared. The air was still chill, however, and the threat of snow was unmistakable. Steadily, however, Ballard held on, reached the summit of the pass at last, and stood there gazing upon a new panorama spread before him—the region of the Upper Nesigak!

The land to which Gautier and Trayner had fled taking Sheila with them! The land which was ruled by a crazed Indian who murdered without compunction. A land of gold and rushing streams; a wilderness ringed by glistening mountain peaks, densely forested with spruce and other conifers. The haunt of the wolf, the grizzly, the great hunting felines, such as the lynx and wild cat—and the range of that lordly forest monarch, the moose.

And here it was, spread before him; an utterly wild and forbiddening vista. Somewhere within its boundaries was the woman he loved. He could only pray that she was still alive and unharmed.

IX

IT was two days later, near dusk, when Tom Ballard paused to look back at the route over which he had come. Still visible to the southward was the mountain range which he had crossed, and beyond that was the valley of the Liard where he had worked out one phase of his own destiny years before. Physically he was worn, almost dead on his feet, yet he was buoyed up by the unswerving determination to carry on until he came to grips at last with Gautier, his enemy. Behind him were miles and miles of muskeg with its treacherous hummocks of moss and grass, where a man might flounder and die in the fine, silt-like mud if he lost his footing. Miles and miles of buckbrush, vine-balsam, willows, and down-alder, he had fought through also, since leaving the Liard River. But the moose-trail which had offered such easy going for so long had vanished now as the hoofed makers of it had scattered. But Gautier had kept on, apparently making no effort to conceal his tracks, and Ballard had persistently followed.

The general direction which the outlaw was holding as well established now, but to what spot it led in this wilderness, Ballard, of course, had no way of knowing. He wondered, however, why he had come across no trace of the Indian killer who was supposed to rule this region. Save for the wild creatures he met occasionally and who stared at him foolishly, for apparently he was the first human being they had ever seen, he came across no living thing. Gradually becoming convinced that the stories of Klunok's prowess were vastly over-rated. Perhaps, indeed, the killer had died, alone and unmourned in this wilderness.

Ballard glanced once more at the western sky. The sun had vanished, but there was still a well-marked circle of light on the horizon—the warning of the sun-dogs still held. But as yet no blizzard had come, and if luck stayed with him he believed that he still had several days before winter would shut down.

At this moment, however, he was more deeply puzzled than he had been at any time since taking up the pursuit of Gautier. For, seemingly he had lost the trail.

It was true, that several times since leaving the Liard River, he had wandered off the trail, but always he had found it readily enough again. Now, however, it seemed that Gautier, was deliberately taking pains to conceal the tracks that he had been making. This might indicate that Gautier considered that Ballard had been tolled far enough into the wilderness. Therefore, the pursuer would do well to be on the lookout for an ambush made by the pursued. Ballard guessed that Gautier's purpose was to lure him deeply into the wilderness and then leave him confused by covering up the trail Ballard had been following.

At this moment Ballard wished that Kaska might have been here. The old Indian, born and bred in the wilderness and trained from infancy to read signs which would be hardly discerned by an ordinary man, could have found Gautier's trail once more. No human being, however cunning and crafty in woodsmanship, could move through the forest and leave Kaska baffled and unable to follow. Ballard was a good woodsman himself, but this was a puzzle which he could not solve readily.

Moreover, as his conviction grew that Gautier was deliberately hiding his trail for some purpose which would be presently explained, Ballard knew a mounting sense of uneasiness. The sun gone, the shadows had melted into thickening twilight among the gloomy spruce trees. In this half-light it was hard to distinguish an object at any distance. What seemed to be a stump might in reality be a motionless form of a bear—or a man! Gautier might now be very close, not yet quite ready to strike, but watching Ballard even as one of the great hunting cats watches its prey that is unconscious of danger.

BALLARD stared around him in the gathering darkness, feeling baffled for the first time. Clearly he could not go on now; he would have to wait till daylight, and then try to discover Gautier's trail once more. How Gautier had managed to hide his own trail, particularly that made by the small boots of Sheila, was something which Ballard could not understand.

Gautier and Trayner were wearing moccasins which made scarcely an imprint in the carpet of needles beneath the conifers. In order to puzzle Ballard, they might have even picked up Sheila and carried her for some distance, careful themselves to walk along the top of logs and leave no signs which Ballard might follow.

All in all, it looked hopeless to him to attempt to go on now in the darkness. He was on the point of turning aside and crawling into the depths of some thicket where he could spend the night when his eyes caught sight of a peculiar white mark on the side of a willow sapling but a few feet away.

His first impression was that it was a "moose-blaze," or a place where the bark of the willow had been torn off by the strong teeth of some hungry moose that had passed that way. But he stepped closer to examine it.

He saw then that it was a fresh cut made with an axe! One side of the trunk had been split, and in this notch two sticks had been placed horizontally, in peculiar fashion. Stepping closer Ballard saw that they were not sticks but were arrows!

Crude yet quite cleverly made they were. For the tips they had black flint, sometimes called volcanic glass, which is nearly as hard as a diamond and which had been chipped off until now they presented a sharp point. These arrow-heads were lashed to the shaft with fine strips of sinew. The opposite end of each shaft was tipped with eagle feathers.

All this Ballard caught in a glance, but the significant position in which the arrows were placed drew his attention further. One was pointing directly down the trail up which he had come, while the other was pointing in the opposite direction! What sinister message was thus conveyed? That these arrows had been left here by Klunok there could be no question. And an Indian would have immediately interpreted the peculiar placing of the arrows, but Ballard, white man that he was, puzzled over it.

Suddenly the explanation came to him. The one arrow pointing directly toward him was a threat that if he went farther into the domain of Klunok he might expect swift death. On the other hand the second pointing in the opposite direction, indicated the route taken by Gautier. The two arrows, therefore, were at once a warning and a challenge. If he would not turn back, would not heed the warning of the first arrow, then, by following the second arrow he might come upon that which he sought, but at the price of his own life.

That this was the message which Klunok had sought to convey Ballard was firmly convinced. Grimly enough, he was forced to admit admiration for the rather clever way in which the crazed Indian had accomplished the thing. But why trouble to warn Ballard at all? Did Gautier know and approve of this message which Klunok had left for the pursuing white man? Puzzling enough was that question, and Ballard felt that he could not answer it.

Nor did he care, particularly. The warning he scoffed at, and the challenge he gladly accepted. Indeed, he felt almost grateful to this insane Indian killer that the queer means which Klunok had taken to warn him of imminent death had succeeded in unraveling the mystery of the vanished trail. Now with a new clue, Ballard told himself that he would press on.

But on second thought the folly of such a step struck him. And, too, the feeling persisted that he was being watched by unfriendly eyes. It might be Gautier and Trayner, although Ballard did not believe so—or it might be Klunok himself. They might be waiting to see what would be the next move he would make.

First, however, Ballard would establish that the second arrow really gave him the clue to the vanished trail. Cautiously and with gun at ready he moved forward in the direction which the second arrow indicated. Not more than fifty feet beyond despite the gloom which was deepening in the forest he discovered once more the imprints of Sheila Morrison's shoe!

The message of the guiding arrow, therefore, was a true one! Yet he could not go on much farther because of the growing darkness. Nevertheless, he would go as far as he could.

He had not taken more than a dozen steps, however, when the silence was shattered by the roar of a gun fired from close at hand.

X

AS the darkness was stabbed by that vicious spear of whitish-yellow flame, Ballard felt himself half-whirled around, and he fell, convinced that he had been wounded. Yet he felt no pain, and then swiftly came realization that the bullet intended for his heart had torn its way through the pack which he carried on his back! In the gloom of the spruce trees, the outlines of a man were vague at best, and whoever had shot at him had unknowingly aimed at the pack instead of at his body. Resourcefully, though, and with his wits about him, Ballard lay there as though dead. But his rifle was ready, and he watched closely in the direction whence the shot had come.

After the shot, the echoes of which went chasing madly off through the forest aisles, silence settled over the woods once more. Nor was there so much as a movement of brush which would reveal the position of the would-be assassin. Evidently the person who had fired the shot was not to be easily trapped. He would make sure that Ballard really was dead or desperately wounded ere he would reveal himself. The position in which Ballard had fallen, left him hidden from the man who had fired the shot.

Ballard waited on, but still the unknown rifleman did not appear. Gradually the thing began to wear on Ballard's nerves. It was one thing to shoot it out with an enemy whom he could see, and quite another to wait here in the darkness unaware of what move the foe might be making. The minutes continued to drag on and Ballard held himself in check as best he could, but with mounting impatience.

Unable to bear it longer he gathered his knees under him and half-rose with the intention of crawling on all fours behind a nearby clump of brush from which point of vantage he might study the position of his enemy. But as he moved, there came again that sharp, bitter report of the rifle, and another bullet whizzed within an inch of his ear.

The second shot came from almost directly in front of him indicating that the foe had silently changed position!

Again Ballard dropped, but as he did so his rifle swept forward. Without throwing the weapon to his shoulder, he fired, the muzzle pointed instinctively at the unseen enemy.

A horrifying scream answered the shot, an eerie wail so weird and terrible that Ballard felt goose-pimples suddenly break out over him while his scalp seemed to crawl. For perhaps two seconds the cry lasted, and then silence came again.

Ballard waited. At last it seemed to him that he heard the lightest crackling of brush from the direction in which he had fired, but directly this was gone. And he heard no more of that blood-chilling cry which had so filled him with vague foreboding.

He became aware now that the moon was rising, showing faintly through the thin curtain of mist spread across the sky. It gave but little light, but it did, however,

relieve the pall-like gloom which had settled down over the woods.

Soon he became cramped from crouching in this unusual position. Moreover, now that his location had been established by the hidden rifleman, it seemed best not to wait too long. He believed that the man who had shot at him was Klunok, and if such were the case, the crazed Indian probably possessed such marvelous skill in woodcraft that he could creep up unseen and unheard until he could get a better shot at Ballard. Therefore, the young man determined to leave this spot as silently as possible. First, however, he would test the alertness of his foe. Bending low so that his head was hidden, Ballard moved the pack from side to side.

But no shots came. Twenty paces to the left, however, Ballard heard the softly muffled sound of breaking twigs. Peering in that direction, it seemed to him that he could determine a pair of glowing eyes, regarding him balefully as the faint moonlight found reflection.

Clearly, however, these belonged to some wild animal and had nothing to do with the ambush which had been laid for him. A bear, perhaps, even a moose or a wildcat, had been passing, and winded him. Ballard shifted his gaze for a moment and when he looked again the eyes were gone.

Nevertheless, he was gratified, for he felt that his chance shot had served to put fear into the man who had tried to kill him. As noiselessly as possible, Ballard crept into a thick growth of stunted balsam. There he carefully unlashed his pack, removed the sleepingbag and placed the pack in a position where it was partly visible through the brush. Then he crawled away some twenty feet where he got into the sleepingbag and, with gun beside him, composed himself to rest, although his nerves were too taut to permit him to sleep at that time.

He told himself that he might have investigated the spot at which he had fired, and from which the weird screaming had come. Nevertheless, that would be a hazardous thing to do. It would be better to wait until daylight. For all he knew he might be walking into a trap laid for him by the crafty Klunok, or whoever it was out there in the dark tangled brush.

SILENT and still were the woods, so that he could literally hear the beating of his own heart. High swept the moon, trying vainly to diffuse its pale light through the haze of the upper airlanes. Ballard's thoughts dwelt on Sheila, and also on the clash which he had come through safely.

He was convinced now that it was Klunok who had ambushed him. This fact, however, gave rise to other conjecture which was disturbing. Klunok had discovered the trail of Gautier; that much was certain. If Klunok was the killer which he had been pictured, then it was not unreasonable to suppose that he had managed to slay both Gautier and Trayner, and if Sheila had not met death also, she had been doomed to a worse fate.

At last there came to his ears from afar off a grunting, bellowing sound which he accurately determined was the challenge of one giant moose-bull to another. The love-moon was waning for the antlered clan, but still a few bulls roamed the hills in quest of mates. These, however, to Ballard were ordinary forest sounds and he paid no attention. But when the moon was high overhead, there came from afar the ghoulish howling of a wolf, a soul-stirring ululation which never failed to send a prickly sensation up and down Ballard's spine.

The cry seemed to typify the utter savagery and desolation of this wilderness.

Slumber came to Ballard's eyes and he slept fitfully, nervously, as does a wild animal who understands full well that vigilance is ever the price of life. His dreams were troubled, and several times he came swiftly awake, convinced that some enemy was prowling near.

Dawn came at last; a bleak, raw dawn with the air a little chiller than it had been before, and the unmistakable smell of snow in the wind. Before the grayness overspread the land, however, Ballard crawled out of the thicket. He made directly for the spot at which he had fired the previous night, and from whence that horrible cry had come.

He located the place without difficulty, and his eyes searched the ground carefully. He found where the would-be assassin

had knelt behind a clump of brush, for here was a slight indentation where a man's knee pressed into the soft mold. But Ballard saw something more.

On a patch of browning leaves was a brown splash of blood! There, too, on the ground where it had fallen unnoticed, was another arrow!

It had been Klunok who had ambushed him! And Klunok had been wounded, yet not so severely that he could not travel.

Somehow the discovery gave Ballard new hope. He had met Klunok and in his first clash with the insane slayer he had come off victor. He had put fear into Klunok's heart, and while it was probable that the Indian would seek to be revenged, he would go about it more warily than before.

Ballard returned to where he had left the pack and shouldered it. Easily enough now he located the trail which Gautier had made, and he struck off with a swinging stride through the forest.

There was no fear in his heart now, save the fear that he might be too late for anything except vengeance. Perhaps before another twenty-four hours passed he would know the truth concerning the fate of Sheila Morrison. He moved ahead.

XI

ALL that day Ballard pressed on, watchful as some hunting animal on the trail of prey. And not without reason, for it was by no means unlikely that Klunok, although wounded, might decide to wait in ambush. But Ballard kept as closely under cover as possible, and avoided openly crossing the little grassy meadows, which were plentiful up here, by skirting the edges of them and taking up the trail once more on the opposite side.

Nor was it difficult now to follow Gautier's trail. Indeed, it seemed, that aside from a single effort to confuse Ballard, the outlaw was perfectly willing to be trailed. Moreover, Ballard found some degree of comfort in the situation. If Klunok had killed Gautier and Trayner, possibly Sheila, also, it had been done farther ahead in the country of the Upper Nesigak. Still, this was by no means improbable, for Gautier might have penetrated well into the region ere Klunok discovered him. However, something in the fact that Gautier's trail still stretched plainly before him gave Ballard new courage in thinking that he might not be too late after all.

For Klunok, Ballard cared nothing now; he had no fear of the crazed Indian, although he would not needlessly expose himself to a chance shot. It was Gautier whom Ballard sought. Gautier, who had robbed him of all that was dear and precious. He firmly believed that Gautier would overplay himself in this crafty game of wits, strength and resourcefulness upon which he had entered. Ballard went on, still guarding against a surprise.

It was noon when he was puzzled by a new discovery. He had found the trail of Jim Morrison!

BALLARD, did not, of course, know the identity of the maker of those tracks. It was apparent, however, that they had not been made by Gautier or Trayner; it could be the trail of some lone prospector. The fact that the maker of the tracks was wearing moccasins instead of boots, made Ballard conclude that it was not a member of the Mounted, sent in pursuit of Klunok. Ballard would have liked to have followed them, but his immediate business was keeping to the trail of Gautier. He went on.

But after an hour of it, Gautier's trail vanished inexplicably. Just how it had been accomplished, Ballard could not know. He guessed readily enough, however, that Gautier had been deliberately tolling him on all this time, and the fact that the trail was lost now, proved that Gautier probably was getting ready to strike. An hour's search for the trail revealed no sign of it. He knew that Gautier was a marvelous woodsman, the equal of any Indian, for that matter; and here, apparently, was a sample of his woodcraft. With mounting impatience, Ballard decided at last that he would cast about in a great circle, perhaps two miles in diameter, in the hope of once more picking up the trail. But he had not gone far when he found himself balked by a swift glacial stream.

It was too deep, and the fall of it was too great for him to ford it. The only thing he could do was to find either a log-jam or a tree which had fallen across the

stream, if he was to get over to the opposite side. This necessitated going up or down stream. He determined upon the latter course.

He found it slow and painful work, this battling through the jungle of willows, alders, buck-brush and devil-club which grew rankly along the stream. There was danger in it, too, for he could not see where he was going, and there was nothing to prevent Gautier or Klunok, posted on some cliff, seeing him. But there was no help for it. He fought through this tangle for perhaps three hours, and gradually there grew in his ears the sound of a distant waterfall. Probably the glacial stream plunged over a cliff. As yet he had not found any place where he could get across the stream.

But presently the tangle of brush thinned out, and he found easier going. Then, abruptly, he came on where the glacial stream was fed by another creek.

This second stream evidently did not have its source at a glacier, for it was clear water, whereas the stream which he had been following was milky with lime-stone silt. Moreover, at the junction of the two creeks, there was an immense pile of flotsam, carried down by freshets the previous summer. By wading and bucking the current, he fought across until he stood with nothing but the second stream barring his way. He decided to follow this toward its source for a distance.

Evidently this second creek had been a booming river during the early part of the season, for there were great sandbars along its reaches. This made the walking easier for him, although he was compelled to wade frequently. Steadily he worked upstream until he came to a point where the creek turned sharply.

HE paused there, for the way seemed to be barred by perpendicular cliffs of smooth basalt whose summit was fringed with scrubby spruce and hemlock. The face of the cliff was covered with moss and lichens, indicating that it was veined with trickles of water which seeped through crevices from the high lands behind the gorge. Likewise, there were evidently mineral deposit in the rock - reddish oxides of iron and blue sulphate of copper —for the face of the cliff was colored as though some gigantic hand had painted it. But Ballard had seen such painted cliffs before, and he was concerned now solely with the idea of getting out of the canyon.

He went nearer the cliffs, to determine if the water was shallow enough there to permit him to wade past the obstruction. Presently he heard the steady murmuring of another creek. Going farther, he saw that from the foot of the cliff there boiled and bubbled a great spring, fed by some underground stream. It was clear and cold, and he bent down to drink of it.

Yet his lips did not touch the water, for his attention was attracted suddenly to a metallic gleam among the fine gravel which was deposited thinly over the rock in the bed of the stream. Wonderingly, he thrust his hand into the water, located that gleaming fragment, and drew it forth. It was a nugget as large as the tip of his little finger! *Gold!*

Moreover, there were other nuggets in sight. Indeed, now that he looked about him sharply, he saw that the bottom of the little stream which boiled out of the foot of the cliff was bright everywhere with that same eye-arresting sheen of gold.

Realizing what this find meant, the thought of the riches on which he had stumbled, drove thought of all else from his mind. He recalled what old Tsumpsit had told him. This, then, must be the gold deposit at the foot of the painted cliffs, which the aged Indian had described. This must be the Nesigak Eldorado!

Still in that prone position, feasting his eyes on the display of wealth before him, Ballard looked up sharply as there came a light rattle of loose gravel from above. What he saw then brought him to his feet with a startled gasp.

Down the face of the cliff, dropping with the swiftness of a meteor, was a boulder weighing several hundred pounds. It was coming straight at him, and was so close then that there seemed no chance for escape.

But Ballard, in that swift glimpse, saw something more. High up at the rim of the cliff was the man who, intentionally or otherwise, had dislodged the boulder. That man was Cassiar Joe Gautier!

XII

WITH that huge boulder falling directly at him, Ballard seemingly had no chance to escape. There was no time, indeed, to leap to his feet, and dodge it. High up on the cliff, Gautier, watching the unsuspecting man down below, had waited until the intended victim had stopped to take a drink from the clear-water creek. Then, toppling the boulder from the ledge where it had been poised, he had the satisfaction of seeing that his aim was true. As accurate as a boy makes a "sink-shot" with marbles, the boulder fell. Ballard, involuntarily closing his eyes, rolled over nearer the face of the cliff.

As the boulder fell, it revolved rapidly. It was by no means round, but an angular fragment of basalt which had cleaved from the rock above by the action of frost. As it spun rapidly in its downward drop, one corner of it grazed the cliff-wall. It was scarcely more than a "kiss," yet it served to deflect the course of the boulder slightly. With an impact which jarred the ground, and fairly submerged Ballard with water from the stream, the thing struck within less than six inches of him.

The shock was so severe that it nearly stunned him, even then. But as he realized that he had been spared, he jumped up and flattened himself against the cliff, out of the scope of Gautier's vision. For a moment he stood thus, debating his next move.

But on the heels of the boulder came the whining of a bullet, and a sharp *spat!* as the missile shattered itself on the coarse gravel at his feet. Gautier had seen that the boulder had missed Ballard, and now he was trying to rectify the mistake by means of gun-fire. He was chancing a shot, although he could not see the man below; he was hoping that the ricochet of a bullet might wound Ballard.

But before Gautier could again shoot, Ballard was under way, running swiftly along the foot of the cliff, keeping under cover as best he could. Now and then he was exposed, and invariably a bullet sang close to him. But in less than a minute he was entirely out of sight of the outlaw above.

Ballard stopped, gun at ready, while he strove for a shot at Gautier. But the wary outlaw, realizing that Ballard had escaped, was not minded to stand out there in plain sight as a target for the other. Nor did Ballard wait for long. He surmised that Gautier was already gone. The thing, therefore, was to get up on the cliff and once more take up the outlaw's trail.

Rather than being frightened by the nearness with which he had come to death, Ballard felt a measure of exaltation. He had at least located Gautier True, he had seen nothing of Sheila, and there was no way of knowing what had happened to her. But Ballard did not believe that Gautier or Klunok had killed her.

So he struck off up the creek, still keeping under cover, and looking for a place where he could scale the cliff and reach the spot on which Gautier had stood.

It required an hour of the hardest kind of work to accomplish it. He was compelled to climb up a nearly perpendicular rock-face, where a misstep might mean death. The rock was slippery with damp moss and lichens, and the vine-balsam was a treacherous foothold which he knew better than to trust. Likewise, he was more or less constantly exposed to a chance shot by either of the two men he sought, or by Klunok himself, who might have trailed him after their clash the night before. But no shots came, and when Ballard had gained the cliff, and began working his way stealthily through the brush to the spot where he had last seen Gautier, he felt new confidence.

After all, he told himself, he could play this game as well as his foes. True, he was not the seasoned woodsmen they were, but Kaska had imparted to him much of the craft which the old Indian had in stalking big game. He came out at last at the place where Gautier had stood.

HE marked the big man's tracks in the soft earth, and even noted the empty shells from Gautier's rifle. He saw where Gautier had gone back into the woods. All the while he was there, Ballard realized that he was courting certain death, for Gautier was famed as a hunter, and it was not unreasonable to suppose that the outlaw was lying in wait, ready to shoot him down.

Yet the thing did not happen. Luck

played with Ballard as he risked himself thus, for he was hot with impulse and eager to come to grips with his foe. Where he was aided, however, was in the mental make-up of the giant. Gautier considered it an ill-omen that Ballard had so miraculously escaped the falling rock and the subsequent gun-fire. Apparently Ballard's hour had not struck.

Therefore, Gautier would toll him deeper into the wilderness, and set a new trap for him. One who was woodsman enough to outwit even Klunok, as Gautier had done, getting the crazed Indian at a disadvantage so that he could reason with him and enlist his aid, could have slain Ballard, had the moment seemed propitious.

But to Gautier it was not propitious; therefore, like one of the great hunting-cats who, having missed the first leap, withdraws as though to think it over, so Gautier was loath to follow up any advantage he might have had at that moment.

Besides, there was plenty of time. Ballard would not leave the country so long as Sheila Morrison was Gautier's captive; and on the other hand, the outlaw knew that winter was at hand, and very soon Ballard would not be able to leave the country even if he so wished. It suited Gautier, therefore, to bide his time, and lay new plans for vengeance.

This, of course, Ballard could not know, but he would not have cared anyway. So eager was he to come to grips with Gautier, and rescue Sheila that he was impatient to the point of recklessness. Yet he would not walk blindly into a trap. And so, while he set off on the trail of Gautier he was as cautious and as watchful as possible. He had not gone a hundred yards into the woods, however, before he made a discovery which set his heart thumping with new hope.

The tracks of Sheila's small boots! After all, she was still alive, despite Klunok. Trayner's tracks were there, too, and Ballard was puzzled to discover the trail of still a third man.

Not for an instant did he dream that her brother was also a captive. The discovery worried him somewhat, for his natural guess was that Gautier had been joined by a third renegade. Nevertheless, Ballard was not intimidated, nor was his determination weakened.

He forged on until dusk, holding closely to the easily-distinguished trail, which led higher into the hills.

But now he deemed it best not to travel by night. So close was he to the object of his pursuit that to grope blindly in the darkness and lose the trail, would be fatal. He would do better to camp as soon as it became too dark to see the trail, and to resume the search with the first hint of dawn. He suspected that Gautier would keep on until long after dark, in order to gain time, but Ballard was convinced that, alone, he could travel more rapidly than could Gautier, Trayner, Sheila and the stranger.

So Ballard made camp, cautiously as usual. He crawled into the depths of a wind-fall, spread his sleeping-bag, and sought slumber, yet ever alert, as a wild animal sleeps.

XIII

THE night was unusually silent, even for a wilderness which knows true silence when the wind is hushed. The sky was still thinly overcast, so that there was no moon, but the air was curiously warm. This portended snow, as Ballard well knew, but the storm probably would hold off for a few days.

Despite the fact that his nerves were strung taut, he slept well, but his ears were attuned to catch the slightest sound. Thus the activities of a deer-mouse in a clump of weeds, as the small rodent busied itself storing up a supply of food to last throughout the winter, brought Ballard wide awake and listening. But he interpreted the light rustling of weeds correctly, and once more he slept.

He awakened again with a feeling that something was wrong, as though he was the subject of a malevolent scrutiny. He sat up and scanned the dark thickets about him, but could see nothing. Nevertheless, he had that same feeling of disquietude that he had known when Klunok had stalked him.

Hearing or seeing nothing Ballard presently lay down once more but not with the intention of sleeping. He lay

there listening, every faculty alert.

And because his ear was resting close to earth, it seemed to him after a time that he heard a soft padding sound which came over this ground telegraph. The sound was utterly unlike that of a man's footsteps, and he knew that it was made by some wild animal. That, perhaps, explained his uneasiness; the thing had been watching him; and now was cautiously circling the thickets wherein he lay.

But he had no fear of it, if such were the case. No wolf, lynx or even a grizzly bear had the courage to attack him as he lay there, he believed. Once more he composed himself for slumber; but as he was about to woo the drowsy god, he heard from the nearby ridge the weird call of a wolf. Talapus, ever persistent, was telling Klunok that once more he had found prey. But Ballard heard the wolf-cry with indifference. It was at a season when wolves were accustomed to call one another, and it had no significance to him. Again he slumbered.

HE awoke with a feeling that, although it was still dark, dawn was not far away; the air had taken on a certain rawness and a cool night wind had sprung up. He crawled out of his sleeping-bag, rolled it up, ate breakfast, and when it was light enough to travel, he set out once more on the trail.

The tracks were plain in the soft mold and Ballard moved forward swiftly. He was determined that before the sun sank behind the western hills this day he would have it out with Gautier. Already nature had been tolerant in withholding the blizzard, but he realized that the storm would not be postponed much longer.

He surmised, too, that Sheila did not know that he was so close, although she undoubtedly believed that he was searching for her. Probably Gautier would keep secret from her as long as possible the fact that Ballard was following. If she knew Ballard was close at hand, she would undoubtedly redouble her efforts to escape.

As dawn came, Ballard saw other signs of the threat of winter. Great flocks of ducks, the sound of their many wings blending into a soft whispering, which suggested waves breaking on a distant shore, passed close overhead; while higher in the air, v-shaped wedges of white geese beat steadily southward, the metallic clangor of their voices drifted down to him faintly. These signs meant that farther northward winter had already gripped the land and that very soon the white hosts of Boreas would have added the Upper Nesigak to territory already conquered.

The sun was breaking through clouds over the eastern hills as he crossed a small clearing at foot of a rock-slide, and it was at that moment that the thing happened.

At the edge of the clearing Ballard had hesitated because he realized that he was courting death in crossing it. Yet Gautier's trail led in that direction, although, of course, no tracks were visible on the rocks, and Ballard had no recourse but to take the chance. He bent low, running as rapidly as he could, but just as he was about to enter the brush on the opposite side, something dealt him a smashing blow in the left shoulder, and he whirled half-around and fell.

As he went down he saw on the ridge above outlined by the sky, and not more than one hundred and fifty yards away the silhouette of Gautier in the act of lowering a rifle. This, then, was the trap which the renegade had set for his pursuer.

ON the heels of that tremendous shock came excruciating pain, and Ballard put his hand to the wounded shoulder, and felt that the coat and shirt were already wet with blood.

Ere Gautier could shoot again, however, Ballard, regaining his wits, rolled and crawled his way quickly to the shelter of a nearby thicket. Nor did he stop there, but kept on while bullets ripped the brush about him. Gautier sprayed death through the thicket, and some of the bullets came so close to the young man's head that he could feel the wind of them.

Yet he was safe. Moreover, he was determined to carry the fight against Gautier at this moment. Slipping off his coat, and shirt, he saw that the wound was merely in the flesh of his shoulder. no bones being broken, and although it was extremely painful it was by no means serious. It bled profusely, which was good for it. It was in such a position

that no tourniquet could stop the bleeding but Ballard knew that no arteries were severed, and that in a short time it would congeal of its own accord.

He took a piece of cloth torn from his shirt and wrapped the wound as best he could, slipped on his coat again, and then, gun in hand, he began working his way through the thicket toward a point where he could command the ridge.

Suddenly he dropped behind a rock, and as he did so another bullet sang over his head. But his own gun roared instant response, and the figure which he had momentarily seen against the horizon vanished abruptly as though it might have been hit.

An instant later he shot again, as his eyes detected another moving figure up there. Then the ridge was devoid of life, and grimly, he settled down to wait.

But he did not wait long. He deflected the muzzle of his gun slightly until the sight covered a hat rising slowly from behind a rock up there. Below the hat, which was evidently pulled well down over the wearer's eyes, was a coat; he could also see the muzzle of a gun. His first impulse was to seize the advantage and shoot; yet he withheld his fire.

And the reason he did so, was because the figure up there seemed to be too unnaturally bold. He suspected a trick for he did not believe that Gautier, Trayner, or even the third man, would reveal himself so carelessly. But what kind of a trick it was, Ballard could not fathom. It might be that Gautier, gun ready was watching for a chance to shoot the instant Ballard fired. Suddenly grown impatient, however, Ballard decided to take the chance anyway, so eager was he to wipe out Gautier and his band. But as his right forefinger tightened on the trigger, the figure up there suddenly came to life.

Indeed, it leaped upward, there was a shrill scream, and then Ballard with a gasp of horror realized how closely he had come to doing something more terrible than he had ever dreamed.

For the figure crouching up there was that of Sheila! Gautier or Trayner had forced her to don the hat and coat, and then held her up from behind the rock so that she would offer an easy target for Ballard's gun. Gautier's fiendish hope was to have her killed by her sweetheart!

Sick at the realization at how close he had come to blighting his own life forever, Ballard was on the point of retaliating by sweeping the ridge with gunfire when his eyes caught sight of something moving stealthily through the trees perhaps half a mile below him.

It was a queer, misshapen figure, bent, and dressed in skins; and it was a man, for a rifle trailed from one hand. Klunok! But that was not the thing which seemed most strange to Ballard.

At the heels of this crazed Indian was a wolf!

XIV

SINCE Klunok vanished after she had first seen him, neither Sheila Morrison nor her brother heard of the Indian. On the other hand, Gautier seemed more in a hurry than ever to penetrate farther into the hills, and Sheila suspected he had reason to believe that Ballard was not far away. The renegade, although he offered her no harm, frequently taunted her by declaring that Ballard was not woodsman enough to follow them. Even if he did so, Gautier pointed out, Ballard would meet certain death.

So they kept on, climbing higher and higher into the hills, crossing glacial streams, miles of muskeg, fighting their way through windfalls where the downtrees lay as thick as jack-straws.

Strangely enough, however, the big man at times actually seemed to become ingratiating. Woman-like, she saw the reason for this readily enough. Gautier was vanity personified, and under other circumstances, had he not been a fugitive but had moved with freedom in the world of men, he would have been termed a "lady-killer."

Again, however, Gautier was his true self, as though he saw the hatred in her eyes which she took no pains to conceal. Trayner she gave little thought; he seemed wholly in the power at Gautier, and had not the initiative to make any move of which his master did not approve.

Hopeless and dispirited Sheila had been for the first few days since Gautier had dragged her from the sinking canoe, and

with Trayner started on their long trek into the wilderness. She had grieved for Kaska, whom she believed to be dead.

The north country is a wide land, and it seemed next to impossible that Ballard could trail them into the wilderness. Then the sensible thing for him to do, as she had seen it, would be to invoke the aid of the Mounted Police, and with skilled Indian trackers take up the hunt.

Even so, however, she had known that it would not be Tom Ballard's way. Hot-headed and impetuous as he was, he would promptly set off on the hunt alone and unaided, thereby minimizing his chances for success. Nevertheless, she loved him for it, for she realized that such impulsiveness was merely a manifestation of his love for her.

But now that Jim was with her, she felt comforted. She realized that her brother would not be permitted to stand in the way of any plans which Gautier might have for her; yet his very presence reassured her.

Yet never were they allowed to be alone. Trayner, evidently acting under order of Gautier, was always present, doubtless to make sure that they did not hatch some plan for escape. In fact, Trayner's sole duty seemed to be to act as their guard. He was a squat, but powerfully-built man with an evil face. And he always held his rifle in readiness. Jim was compelled to carry a part of the outfit, but not so much as either Gautier or Trayner, both strong men who swung along under weight of their packs apparently without noticing them.

"Jim," Sheila said suddenly to her brother one day, "do you think that Tom has already discovered what has happened, and set out in search of us?"

Her brother shook his head.

"He might have untangled the thing by this time," Jim replied. "But it doesn't seem to me that there's a chance that he can overtake us before the snow comes, and that will be too late, unless I miss my guess." Then, seeing that for the moment, Trayner was not in hearing distance, Morrison added:

"My only chance is for me to get hold of a gun. Like a fool, I let myself be caught off-guard before, because I never dreamed that I was running into Gautier and Trayner. Once let me lay hands on a rifle, and I'll finish the job before Tom gets here, if he ever does. He must be far beind us now, even if he's found our trail at all."

Sheila shook her head.

"But I can't help feeling that he is not far away right at this moment," she whispered, that Trayner might not overhear.

AND it was a few minutes later that Gautier, leading the way as usual, stopped suddenly like a dog who has scented game. With a motion of his hand he halted Trayner and the others. They waited there while Gautier, still watching something which he had seen, began slowly stealing forward.

There came to their ears suddenly a dull, thudding sound, muffled and faint. It was the impact of the boulder striking the creek-bed after Gautier had pushed the huge rock from the top of the cliff. On the heels of that they heard the sharp bark of his rifle several times, and then silence.

"Tom!" breathed Shela.

"It might be the Mounted," countered Jim, but his sister shook her head.

"No, I know it was Tom," she insisted. Then they saw Gautier returning swiftly. He was frowning, but at sight of the girl the old sneering smile lighted his face once more.

"Your friend, Ballard—he is no more," Gautier remarked. "First I crush heem with a big rock, so, and then I finish the job with my gun. Don't worry, *ma cherie*, that he is going to come along and spoil our little friendship."

But Sheila intercepted a quick glance which Gautier shot at Trayner and so did Jim Morrison.

"You lie, Gautier," Morrison retorted. "It was Tom Ballard, all right, I'll believe that; but the very fact that you shot so many times proves to me that he got away!"

Sheila gave an exclamation of thankfulness, but Gautier's face went black. He stepped forward and slapped Morrison with the back of his huge hand. The blow almost knocked the boy down, but for an instant it seemed that he was going to spring at Gautier; then he controlled

himself. After all, there was Sheila to consider and if he were gone—the odds were great that Gautier would kill him—she would be left alone with these brutal renegades. White-faced, yet calm, Morrison faced the giant.

"I'll kill you for that some day, Gautier," he remarked coolly. Gautier sneered at him.

"But no!" the giant replied. "When the time comes for you to keel me, M'sieu Morrison, you'll be quite dead yourself. I have not forgotten that you turned on me. I let you live now because you are ma'mselle's brother. Later, it is for her to say whether or not you shall die. You understand?" He grinned at them triumphantly.

There was no mistaking his meaning. Sheila flushed deeply, while her brother went white and seemed on the point of hurling himself at Gautier's throat, but she stopped him.

"You love your brother, *hein?*" went on Gautier, still smiling. "I have no doubt, ma'mselle, how you will decide when the time comes." He turned away abruptly and led off through the woods, while Trayner at the rear with rifle ready, signified that they were to move on.

"The beast!" raged Jim. "If it comes to that, Sheila, you'll never have to make a choice to save my life. I'll kill myself first!"

But she did not reply. At that moment, perhaps, she was silently praying that she should never have to make the decision, that Tom Ballard would have arrived. She had vast confidence in Ballard; it had already been demonstrated that, big though Gautier was, the young factor of Liard Post was his master. He had beaten Gautier at every turn and he would do it again. If only he would arrive in time!

For the rest of the day they pressed on at an unusually rapid gait, and it was not until darkness had fallen and the way became too thick for them to travel, without being able to see obstacles, that Gautier ordered a halt. Brother and sister stood apart while Trayner undid the pack, got out the grub, and built a fire. Meanwhile, Gautier, with a few deft strokes with his axe, lopped off limbs which he piled on the ground for Sheila. For himself, Trayner and Morrison, he cut no boughs.

Presently the meal was prepared, a sketchy meal at that, as though Gautier was minded to conserve food as much as possible, and then he spread his sleeping-bag, crawled within, and almost immediately the heaviness of his breathing indicated that he was asleep. Morrison spread his own bag at the side of the bough bed after arranging the bag belonging to Sheila.

On the opposite side of the fire Trayner sat, scowling thoughtfully at them. He made no attempt at slumber; when midnight arrived he would awaken Gautier, who would take the watch from then until it was time to start. For they took no chances that either of their prisoners would escape. Thus it had been since the flight into the Upper Nesigak had begun.

Sheila, exhausted by the long marches which she had been compelled to make since leaving the river, very quickly fell asleep, but Morrison lay awake a full hour, his thoughts dwelling heavily upon the situation ere he gave himself to light slumber. He awoke, at last, to see that Gautier had replaced Trayner on guard.

THE big man was on the opposite side of the fire staring at the sleeping Sheila, an inscrutable look in his eyes. At last he softly tip-toed around the fire, until he came close and stood over her as though gloating. Presently he discovered that Morrison's eyes were wide, regarding him watchfully. This seemed to discomfort Gautier, for he hastily turned away to his old position on the opposite side of the fire.

Before daylight, Gautier aroused everybody and soon they were on their way again.

In those early morning hours they traveled rapidly. Soon they began climbing a great rock-slide. At the top of it Gautier called a halt, and looked back over the route they had come. Suddenly he motioned for all of them to flatten down.

Evidently Gautier had seen something. Although Sheila could not make out that anybody was following them, something told her that Tom Ballard was coming.

The thought thrilled her, and at the same time she felt fear; for she realized that Gautier was preparing a trap. Thus they remained for perhaps fifteen minutes, and then Sheila's pulse quickened as she saw a familiar figure through the woods.

It was Tom Ballard, and he was about to cross the open space at the foot of the rock-slide. She saw Gautier, an evil smile on his face, swing his gun into position and make ready. She cried out, as at the first shot Ballard dropped. But she gave an exclamation of joy the next instant as Ballard rolled and crawled toward the nearby thicket.

She heard Gautier cursing as he fired shot after shot into the brush where Ballard had gone. And then came the answering shot from Tom Ballard's rifle which told her that he was not dead. One bullet spattered against a rock so closely to Gautier's face that he ripped out an oath and staggered back, and for a moment she thought that he was wounded.

After that silence settled down over the rock-slide. Presently she heard Gautier and Trayner speaking in low tones.

At last Trayner took off his hat and coat, and crawled over to where she was lying behind the rocks. Seizing her roughly, he slipped her arms into the coat, jammed the hat on her head, pulled the brim low over her eyes, and then seizing her around the waist slowly forced her up from behind the rocks.

Sheila struggled, for she realized her danger. She knew that she faced death from Tom Ballard's rifle. Unable to bear the ordeal longer she screamed and tore herself from Trayner's grasp.

While this was going on, her brother lay but a few feet away, Gautier's rifle in the middle of his back.

"Thank God!" Jim cried, as Sheila sank back out of sight. "Ballard is too smart for you, Gautier. He'll kill you yet, if I don't."

Gautier snarled at him, disappointment and rage on the big man's features. Gautier's ruse had failed.

THEN from down below came a burst of rifle fire. Sheila knew that Tom now understood the trick which Gautier had attempted to play upon him. Bullets sang over the head of Gautier, or ricocheted from the rocks; but none came close to Sheila. Crouching there, Gautier waited until Ballard's rage had spent itself. Cautiously then the giant peered out from behind his rock and gave an exclamation of satisfaction.

"Klunok comes!" he said in a low tone to Trayner. Both Sheila and her brother saw far below them in the timber the slinking form of the crazed Indian. The wolf mystified them, as no doubt it did Gautier and Trayner, but it was apparent, too, that the creature was tamed.

"Klunok will either kill Ballard or drive him out into the open!" exulted Gautier. "You, ma'mselle, shall see your lover die!" He smiled his triumph at her. Worried and anxious, Sheila would have called out a warning to Tom had she not then seen him move. He, too, was looking at the incoming Klunok. It was apparent that he saw the Indian.

Suddenly Gautier turned to Trayner.

"Klunok is mad," the renegade explained. "And he may not understand. You, *mon ami*, guard with your life these two, while I go down down below to intercept Klunok. You have two guns, and if Ballard starts this way, you can stop him very easily. Klunok and I will come upon him from behind." He backed away from the rock behind which he had been lying, and then began his stealthily circuitous stalk down through the brush toward the oncoming Indian.

Gautier had no more than vanished when Sheila felt her brother's eyes upon her. She knew then what was in Jim's mind; that this was the opportunity for which he had been waiting. While Gautier was gone they would overcome Trayner, if they could, and make a break for liberty to join forces with Tom Ballard down there. And before she could speak, her hot-tempered brother had carried the plan into execution.

It was rather a large task to which Trayner had been assigned, anyway. He was compelled to keep watch on the hidden Ballard down there and at the same time guard these two, who, he knew, were ready to take instant advantage if the opportunity offered. He took his eyes off Jim Morrison for a moment, and still carrying the two guns, started on a crawl for the rock behind which Gautier had

lain. But at the first move Morrison was on him like a wildcat.

Fear and anger lent strength to Morrison, and luck was with him at that. He half-leaped, half-fell upon Trayner, the first blow catching the outlaw at the base of the ear, stunning him. As Trayner with a sigh rolled over upon his back, Morrison smashed viciously again and the man lay quiet, senseless.

"Here!" Jim cried, as he retrieved his own rifle, wrenched from Trayner's hands the outlaw's gun and handed it to Sheila. "I won't stop to kill him. We're going to help Tom!" The next instant they were hurrying down the slope direct for the spot where they had last seen Ballard.

XV

IN the main room of the trading-post at McLeod Landing, a solemn conference was in progress. McTavish was there, and so was Father Allard. Presiding over the conference was Tomlinson, district superintendent of the big fur company which both Ballard and McTavish served. It was Tomlinson who had given Ballard a chance to make his way toward the top in this north country.

Likewise, there was Inspector Cargill, of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, spick and span in his scarlet-and-gold uniform. Outside the post, waiting the result of the conference, was a detachment of ten Mounties, with a good-sized pack-dog outfit. By a forced march they had come over the old trail from the southward to Telegraph Creek, and then another forced march had brought them to McLeod Landing, the head of navigation on the Liard.

It was the most pretentious show of strength on the part of the Mounted that had ever been seen at McLeod Landing. Usually but two or three men were assigned to the duty of rounding up such a criminal as Cassiar Joe Gautier, but the fact that here were ten Mounties, commanded by an inspector, indicated that they considered the job to be of more than ordinary importance. Inspector Cargill explained the situation to the others.

"We have determined that this expedition of ours is to be the last one in search of Gautier and Trayner," he announced. "There will be no turning back; we shall keep after the fugitives until they are taken.

"And at the same time, we shall account for this crazed Indian, Klunok. In the past, luck has played with him, and he has managed to evade capture. The Upper Nesigak country is so large and in many parts almost inaccessible, that ordinary patrols sent in search of Klunok have been unable to run him down. We are taking enough men this time to cover the country thoroughly."

Tomlinson nodded.

"Until Gautier, Trayner and Klunok are accounted for, this country is not going to be safe for any man," he pointed out. "You see what has happened to the Indian, Kaska, and the girl, Sheila Morrison. Gautier would never dare commit such an outrage unless he believed that he was going to make his escape good in the Nesigak country. But, at the same time, he will have to contend with Klunok, who owes allegiance to no man, and who kills impartially all who come into the land which he regards as his own private domain. It may be that Klunok and Gautier, between themselves, will settle our problem for us, or at least make the work easier."

But the inspector shook his head.

"I am by no means sure of that," he remarked. "There was a purpose behind the selection, on Gautier's part, of the Upper Nesigak country where Klunok lives. True, Gautier is in flight, but there are safer regions for him in which to hide out. We have learned that between Gautier and Klunok there is a sort of strange friendship, or at least there was at one time. It may very well be that they have joined forces."

McTavish put in:

"Then that spells death for poor Tom Ballard, who, hot-headed as are most lads of his age, struck out alone to rescue Sheila Morrison. He'll never come out alive, I'm thinkin'."

Tomlinson turned to the inspector.

"You have an ample force of men," he said, "but at the same time the fur company wishes to extend to you such aid as it can offer. There are a few of our trappers who have not as yet gone out

to their winter camps. They are at your service."

"Thank you," replied Inspector Cargill, "but the Mounted does not depend upon posses of civilians. If you wish, however, there is nothing to prevent you from organizing a posse of your own, Tomlinson. We shall welcome the co-operation of your men.

"But we can use a guide. When we started on this expeditions, I had in mind obtaining the services of this Indian, Kaska, whom I regard as one of the best trackers in the North. But I find that he has been wounded, that he is unable to go. We must, therefore, push on as best we can, striking for the Upper Nesigak country, and trusting that we may come across the trail of the men we seek."

Father Allard spoke up.

"I have had all I can do to prevent Kaska from getting up and going in search of Ballard, whom he idolizes," the cleric said. "It would probably mean death for Kaska at this time, but still he is not convinced that he shouldn't go."

Cargill shook his head.

"We won't take him," he decided. "He could be of little help to us in his present condition, and would only slow us down. It must not be forgotten that time is extremely precious just now. We do not know what has happened to the girl whom Gautier captured, and Ballard's fate is also a mystery. Wasn't there a brother of this girl, somewhere in this country?"

McTavish nodded.

"I'm thinkin' he's also in there," the factor remarked. "He left here on a prospectin' trip, and while he was always a wee bit close-mouthed, I suspect that he went into the Nesigak."

"Countin' the girl, there's three of our folks in that country now, and there's three of the worst outlaws the north has ever known, in there, too. I'm not givin' to prophesyin', inspector, but I'm thinkin' there'll be plenty of blood shed before ye come by McLeod Landing once more."

AT that moment, there was a knock on the door. McTavish opened it. A sergeant of the Mounted stood there. At sight of his superior officer, the Mounty saluted.

"An old Indian has just come upriver, sir," he reported. "He hails from Liard Post. Thought he might have some information for us. He says his name is Tsumpsit."

"Tsumpsit?"

McTavish gave an exclamation.

"There's the man for ye, inspector!" the factor cried. "Old Tsumpsit must know the Nesigak country. 'Tis rumored that he's been in there himself."

"Send him in!" ordered the inspector shortly.

"Yes, sir!" the sergeant said.

The old Indian appeared at the doorway, and stood there blinking in mild bewilderment at sight of the men gathered in the main room of the post. McTavish addressed him.

"Come in, Tsumpsit," he invited. "'Tis news we have for ye; and maybe ye can help us. Tom Ballard's gone, and so is the white girl who was to be his squaw. Maybe ye can help us."

The old Indian digested this information, and then, slowly, a smile twisted his lips. All Indians are inordinately vain, and it pleased old Tsumpsit mightily that these white men, particularly the Mounted Police, should admit that he could be of service to them.

"I know," he replied solemnly. "I hear about Ballard. Him in much trouble. I come tell you."

McTavish turned to the others.

"The underground telegraph!" he remarked jubilantly. "'Tis an uncanny way these redskins have to hearin' what is goin' on in another part of the country."

"Tell us about it, Tsumpsit."

McTavish pushed forward a chair and the old Indian seated himself.

"Two, t'ree days ago, white crow fly out of forest and speak to me," Tsumpsit went on oracularly. "He tell me Ballar' in much trouble. White squaw in much trouble, too. Another man—friend of Ballar'—him in much trouble."

"That must be Jim Morrison!" guessed Tomlinson. "But how do you know so much about it." he demanded of Tsumpsit. "There was no white crow—"

"Excuse me, sir," put in Mcavish diplomatically. "'Tis best not to contradict him. That's his way of tellin' what he learned."

"Go on, Tsumpsit," he urged. "Tell us more."

But the old Indian's lips closed resolutely. It was apparent that he was offended. The act of Tomlinson in doubting him made Tsumpsit deeply resentful.

"No tell more," he replied stubbornly.

McTavish sighed.

"And that, gentlemen," he remarked, "is all that ye'll get from him, I'm thinkin'." But Inspector Cargill addressed Tsumpsit.

"We know you speak the truth," he said gently. "We did not mean to doubt you. Is Ballard your friend?"

Old Tsumpsit nodded vigorously.

"Then you can be of help to us," went on the inspector. "We need a guide to take us into the Nesigak country. The white father has said that Klunok, who is under the protection of the Saghalie of the Skies, must be taken away, so that he will kill no more men. Two other very bad men, Gautier and Trayner, are in there, too. The Nesigak must be safe for all men hereafter.

"Will you show us the way?"

Old Tsumpsit considered this for a moment. He was old, and travel was an arduous thing for him. He much preferred to be alone at his home in the forest, to eat and sleep when he chose, and to dream of the days when he was a strong young buck to whom hardship meant nothing. The Nesigak was a rough, cruel country to one who was old, as was Tsumpsit.

Still, Ballard was his friend. The young factor of Liard Post had treated him fairly.

"Me go with you," said Tsumpsit suddenly, rising from his chair. "Me show you the way!"

Tomlinson stood up also.

"I'll gather what men I can," he told Inspector Cargill. "We'll make this drive a sweeping one, and when we've finished, the Upper Nesigak is going to be safe, for the first time in years!"

XVI

IN that mad flight down the rockslide, to join Ballard, Sheila and Jim Morrison knew that they courted death from the rifle of either Gautier or Klunok. Rather than permit the girl to escape, Gautier would kill her; and, of course, he would not spare Jim Morrison so long as there was no purpose to be served in so doing.

Slipping and sliding, now hidden behind a boulder and now in plain sight, dodging behind clumps of brush growing in interstices of the rocks, they descended. As they neared, they saw the amazed Ballard, as though unable to believe the evidence of his eyes, rise up to greet them, disregarding enemies who might be waiting to kill him.

He clasped Sheila in his arms, their first reunion since she had departed for the "outside" nearly a year before. And under what strange conditions had their reunion taken place! The plans they had made for meeting at McLeod Landing, the wedding, and then the honeymoon in the hills—all this had been swept aside by the power of circumstance. Now they stood in the shadow of death, here in the heart of a virgin wilderness. Still, they had each other; and that recompense was enough, even though it might last but a few brief moments.

For what seemed a long space of time, Ballard had eyes for nothing else but his Sheila, who had been restored to him, not even aware of her brother, Jim, being there. The girl was crying and laughing by turns, hysterically, while Ballard sought to soothe her with endearing words meant only for her ears.

"I was afraid—you wouldn't find us—that you would be killed!" sobbed Sheila. "Gautier gloated over his intention to kill you—and as for me—"

Ballard smoothed her hair tenderly.

"Don't talk about it, dear!" he urged. "Thank God that I've found you, that I was not too late. Gautier is not going to harm us."

Then, as though for the first time, he saw Morrison. Ballard grinned with surprise and pleasure.

"You, Jim?" he asked. "How did you get here?"

Morrison told him.

"But we've no time to lose," Morrison concluded. "Gautier is already on his way to join Klunok, and they'll cut us off. Trayner is still up there on the cliff. He'll be coming to shortly. There was no use tying him, and I couldn't murder

a helpless man. But we've got his gun, although Gautier and Klunok are still armed."

Ballard nodded. Once more he was his old self. Sheila, too, had controlled herself.

"This way!" ordered Ballard. "The game has changed. From now on Gautier will be the hunter, instead of the hunted. We'll strike for the river, keeping ahead of him if we can.

"But I haven't finished with him yet. There is still the reckoning to come. But I want to see Sheila safely out of his hands before I settle with him."

It was Ballard who gave Jim Morrison the route they were to take, which was the most direct one leading to the Liard.

JIM MORRISON went ahead, and after him came Sheila. Tom Ballard trailed at the rear, gun ready, for he suspected that the attack which threatened would come from that direction.

At the point where the reunion had taken place they were virtually between Trayner on the cliff above and Klunok, and possibly Gautier, who must have been joined by the Indian by this time, at the rear. Trayner could be disregarded for the time being; besides, he had no rifle. But they must move in a way to avoid Gautier and Klunok.

The Indian had vanished since Ballard had stood up for one last look. With him had gone the wolf which they knew must have been tamed by the savage. But that a meeting between Klunok and Gautier had taken place, there could be no question. So, they struck off in a wide loop which would eventualy take them back to the old trail once more. They traveled as swiftly as they could and still maintain the pace for any length of time. At the rear, watching always for a glimpse of Gautier or Klunok in pursuit, walked Ballard.

An hour passed, and there had been no sign of pursuit. This struck Ballard as unusual; still, he realized that Gautier doubtless had lost some time in ascertaining what had happened to Trayner. Possibly the lesser outlaw, too, might have been hurt worse by Morrison's blows than was apparent. In any event, time slipped by, and the fleeing trio seemed to be making good their uninterrupted escape.

The sun mounted to the zenith, and began swinging toward the western hills. The air had a marked tang to it, and the circles of light which dogged the march of the orb across the heavens gave mute warning that time was indeed precious if he was to reach the distant Liard before winter closed down. Now and then he spoke an encouraging word to Sheila, for he realized that the rapid pace which they had set must be telling severely upon her slighter physique.

"We're burning daylight, honey," he assured her. "Soon it will be dark, and even Gautier and Klunok cannot follow us then. If we can keep ahead of them tonight, we've got a good chance of making it to the river.

"Besides, Gautier won't dare follow us too far. He knows that the Mounties must be out looking for him by this time, and he would be running the risk of meeting them." To her brother he counseled:

"Keep a sharp lookout ahead, Jim. There's no telling but that Klunok and Gautier have managed to get ahead of us, and are arranging a little party for our benefit. But I think they're still behind."

"I hope so," Jim said grimly.

Soon they were once more on the trail, for they had completed the loop just as Ballard planned. He felt not a little jubilant when he saw again the familiar tracks in the soft mold. He paused to study them more carefully. All the tracks, even his own, as he had followed the trail, pointed in the same direction.

"It means that Gautier and Klunok are still back there," Ballard pointed out, "unless they have avoided this trail, and are cutting through the woods to head us off.

"If we can keep on until darkness comes, we'll have the jump on them. Even if they do hold to our trail at night, it will be slow work for them. I know, because I've tried the same thing."

"But you forget the wolf," Sheila pointed out. "The wolf which accompanied Klunok. If the animal is as tame as it seems to be, might not Klunok use it to trail us at night."

Ballard started at her words. It was true that he had forgotten the

wolf. It might very well be that Klunok and Gautier could follow the beast at night, the infallible nose of the wolf picking out the way as easily as thought they had left a plain trail.

"We've got to take that chance," he announced. "There's no way out of it. But from now on we can consider the wolf as much an enemy of ours as is Gautier, Klunok or Trayner." Again they were under way, and silence fell among them, for there had come an added uneasiness from Sheila's words.

It was one thing to be trailed by human beings who, no matter how skilful, might be outwitted; but there would be no such thing as throwing the wolf off the scent. For the first time they felt something of the sensation experienced by criminals fleeing from trained bloodhounds. Jim Morrison, leading the way, for the trail was easy to follow, scanned the coverts ahead more closely, while Ballard redoubled his watch at the rear. And, by and by, they crossed a stretch of muskeg, plunged into the brush and came out at last on the lip of a cliff. There Ballard paused.

It was the same cliff from which Gautier had started the boulder which had so nearly crushed Ballard as the latter had lain on the edge of the stream whose bottom seemed almost paved with golden nuggets. But in order to get out of that same canyon, and to reach this point, Ballard had gone upstream for some distance.

"Here is a chance for us to save time," he told the others. "That cliff is steep —almost straight up and down, for I saw it from the bottom. But if we can get down here, we'll save a long trip upstream. Down there, we can pick up my old trail once more, and strike directly for the Liard.

"Think you can make it, Sheila?"

She turned back from her contemplation of the awful depth and smiled at him confidently.

"I'd dare more than that—for you, Tom," she whispered. And Jim Morrison found it discreet to become absorbed for a moment in studying the steep rockwall down which they must descend. Suddenly he gave an exclamation.

"Mountain goats have gone down here!" he announced. "That doesn't mean that we can get down as well as they did, for they've jumped from one ledge to another. But at least there's a sort of trail."

Ballard found that it was so. Those daring alpinists in shaggy white, who had pioneered a trail down the cliff, possibly to reach the creek at the bottom of the canyon, had taken a route which would appall a human being; nevertheless, it seemed possible that the descent could be accomplished.

Ballard went first, that he might catch Sheila in case she slipped, while just behind her, sometimes steadying her, came Jim. They were halfway down, when the girl cried out:

"Look!"

AT the edge of the cliff which they had just quitted a wolf stood, looking down at them without fear. Sheila's guess had indeed been right. Talapus had trailed them. He would show Klunok and Gautier the route by which the fleeing trio had escaped.

Ballard paused and unslung his rifle, which he had been carrying over his shoulder while descending the cliff. But ere he could aim the weapon the wolf melted from view.

"Come on!" Ballard told the others. "We've got to hurry. Gautier and Klunok can't be far behind."

It was perilous work, going down that cliff. A misstep might mean death on the rocks below, and there was, too, the danger of dislodging a boulder. Besides, Gautier and Klunok might appear at any moment above, and have the fleeing trio at their mercy. Now and then Sheila muffled a cry, as it seemed that she must surely be hurled into space; but always Ballard was there with a comforting word. White-faced and silent, Jim Morrison made the descent.

And they reached the bottom at last, safely, although they had numerous bruises. Tom Ballard's wounded shoulder had stiffened, until each movement gave him a sharp twinge of pain, yet he made no complaint.

"At least that's over!" cried Jim Morrison in relief, once they were at the bottom. Then his eyes glimpsed the little stream. with the telltale specks of gleam-

ing yellow gold on its bed-rock bottom.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "Look, Tom!"

Ballard nodded.

"I found it, on the way here," he replied. "But old Tsumpsit found it ahead of me. He it was who told me of the painted cliffs, and the gold deposit at the base."

Morrison shook his head in amazement.

"I never dreamed of such a find as this," he marveled. "If the boys at McLeod Landing knew of such a 'strike' as this, all the outlaws in the north couldn't keep them out of here."

He would have waded into the stream to garner a few nuggets but Ballard halted him.

"No time for that," Ballard decided. "Klunok and Gautier can't be far behind, and every moment is precious to us, now. We've got to get out of here on the double-quick, to beat winter and beat these outlaws. The gold won't vanish. The stuff is no good to either Gautier or Klunok. Next spring we'll come back and get it."

Swiftly, then, he led the way through the forest, retracing the route he had taken in coming into this place. All the remaining hours of daylight they kept going, and only when darkness fell did Ballard order a halt, that Sheila might gain needed rest.

But she would not permit them to tarry long. She understood that it was she who was slowing the pace, making them easier victims for the outlaws who could not be far behind. Darkness gave the pursued an advantage, and she insisted upon making the most of it.

On and on they went through the silent woods, their way unlighted by any moon, for the sky was deeply overcast. It was near midnight when the thing happened.

XVII

IN single file the three of them had been holding their way. Ballard moved ahead, and after him came Sheila, while Jim Morrison brought up the rear. Since the coming of darkness, they had not troubled to keep to the trail. The trail made no difference now anyway, except, perhaps, that it made the walking a little easier. Besides, by striking blindly through the forest, holding only in a general way toward the distant mountains of the divide which must be crossed before they could once more reach the Liard and supposed safety, they made it as difficult as possible for Klunok and Gautier to follow.

Yet it was so dark, and the way was so rough, that they proceeded only at the imminent risk of life and limb through a stumble or fall. Time after time they did fall, but without serious result.

Ballard was for stopping until daylight, for he feared Sheila would hurt herself. But she would not listen to it, declaring that they must not be delayed through consideration for her. So they went on, fighting brush every foot of the way. At last, when they were crossing a ravine, which was choked with windfalls, Ballard heard her cry out.

He was perhaps fifty feet ahead of her, and whirling, he hurried back quickly. He found her lying on the ground, crying.

"I've twisted my ankle," she told him. "And that means—we can't go on! Gautier and Klunok will overtake us."

Ballard's heart sank; nevertheless, he tried to keep up a cheerful front. He knew now that he should have adhered to his first intention, to camp for the night, in order to avoid just such a happenstance as this.

"Looks like we're sunk," declared Jim Morrison. "Well—"

"No!" announced Ballard. "We're not sunk. We're going ahead just as we were. We won't travel so fast, but we'll keep going. If we wait here, either the outlaws will overtake us, or we'll be trapped by the storm.

"Cheer up, Sheila!" He patted her hands in the darkness. "We're not whipped yet, by any means!"

Ballard stooped and picked her up. She exclaimed at the pain as she tested weight on her injured foot, and would have fallen had he not steadied her. His own wounded shoulder still gave him agony, but he made no complaint.

"Lead the way, Jim," he told Morrison. "I'll take care of Sheila even if I have to carry her." Had they been given time they might have rigged a rude hammock on which they could have carried the girl, but every moment was precious. So they

went on, Jim Morrison in advance, and bending aside the brush so that Sheila, supported by Tom Ballard, could hobble.

A quarter of a mile of it, however, and Ballard felt the girl suddenly go limp in his arms. Gamely enough she had not protested against the excruciating pain she was suffering. Worried, Ballard let her down and chaffed her wrists while Morrison brought water in his hat from a nearby stream which was heard trickling in the darkness. Presently she opened her eyes, and saw dimly Ballard's face bending over her.

"Tom!" she cried, and her arms went around his neck. "I hate to be a quitter, but I—I can't go on!"

Ballard handed his rifle to Morrison, who was already carrying two guns, including the one he had taken from Trayner.

"Better make an armful of it, Jim," Ballard told him. "I'll have an armful myself, because I'm going to carry Sheila. *We're going on!*"

He straightened up, the girl in his arms, and then as Morrison led the way, Ballard followed, bearing his burden.

SHEILA knew better than to protest. As she felt his strong arms about her and looked up into his face she marveled at the change which the northland had wrought in this man since she had first met him.

Two years of life in the north, a rigorous life, and his character, too, had been given a hardening process. He was a man—certainly the most wonderful one, Sheila told herself, that she had ever known—a veritable young giant in stature, and clean at heart as the wind which blew down from the cold mountain peaks. . . . A fighter now, who by his courage and persistence had overcome almost insurmountable obstacles, penetrating thus far into the wilderness to find her. . . . A man to worship. Sheila's arms tightened a little more about his neck, and then from the darkness ahead, she heard her brother give an exclamation.

There was a rattle of guns as Morrison dropped two of the weapons he was carrying. There followed the flash of a rifle, the startlingly loud report of it; a weird cry, which was at once a war-whoop and the savage scream as of an animal. Twice more Morrison's gun flashed.

Then Ballard had put Sheila down quickly, and with a shout of encouragement to Jim Morrison, was gone.

There was no doubt as to what had happened. With the aid of the wolf, Talapus, the outlaws had trailed the fleeing trio as easily in the darkness as though it had ben broad daylight. Moreover, Sheila's injury had slowed the pace which Ballard had set at the beginning.

Lying there half-dazed by the unexpectedness of the happening, Sheila heard the crashing of guns ahead. But from close at hand and to one side of her there came the slightest rustle of dried leaves as they were pressed by a soft-padded foot. In speechless terror she was aware that within three feet of her was some low-moving thing, its outlines hardly perceptible in the gloom. . . . Something shaggy. Klunok, the crazed Indian, was clad in the skins of animals; or it might be the wolf, Talapus!

Suddenly she straightened up, and the scream which had been choked unuttered in her throat rose to her lips, for the thing was close at hand, almost touching her—

XVIII

AT the first warning of the ambush set by Gautier and into which Jim Morrison had led them unwittingly, Ballard had dropped Sheila. He sprang to Jim's side, and seized one of the rifles. A second later he had thrown it to his shoulder and fired at what seemed to be a moving shadow.

That horrible scream answered him, even as it had answered him the night he had been ambushed by Klunok. But whether it was the Indian at whom he had shot, and whether the bullet had found the mark, was something which Ballard could not tell. Beside him, Morrison was blazing away.

Then from the rear had come Sheila's cry, and instantly Ballard had regretted his hasty action in leaving her. It had seemed improbable that harm could come to her so suddenly, for she was but a few paces back there, while up ahead the

real attack was going on. Disregarding the unseen foes, Ballard raced back.

But that cry was the only clue to guide him. Of a sudden the woods had become silent, for Morrison had stopped shooting and no longer was the fiendish screaming to be heard.

"Sheila!" called Ballard doubtfully. But no answer came back to him. "Sheila!" he cried again, as a horrid realization broke on him, for he knew that he was standing on the exact spot where he had dropped her. But there was no sound. Yet it seemed that he heard from a distance a mocking laugh. He could not be sure of it.

"Sheila!" he called again. Then to Jim Morrison who had come up behind him:

"Jim, they've got her! They framed this attack just to get her! They hoped to kill me, perhaps, but they knew they could torture me worse if they carried her away.

"Jim," and a queer note crept into his voice, "everything that I've done has been for naught. Gautier has her and he won't let her get away this time!"

Jim Morrison clapped him on the shoulder. Boy though he was, Jim had many manly characteristics and in this crisis he was almost calm.

"Buck up, Tom," he counseled. "At least there's two of us now to trail them, where as before you were alone. What can be done once can be done again." He tried to put a note of cheerfulness into his voice, but there was a ring of hopelessness in it which Ballard did not fail to detect.

"Jim," replied Ballard, "I'm going about this thing now with the assumption that I'm too late, but Gautier is not going to miss his chance of vengeance this time. But whether he does or not it makes no difference. I ran from him before because Sheila was with me, and I hoped that we could escape from these cursed hills before winter set in, but it seems that we haven't one chance in ten thousand now.

"So I'm going to stay, and I'm not going to leave this country until Gautier, Trayner and Klunok are either dead or in my hands. I'm going to take Sheila away from them again and then, instead of trying to get back to the Liard, I'm going to continue to hunt them down. I should have done it before—it was the one mistake I made. But I wanted to get her to safety first before I squared accounts with Gautier."

Jim's hand gripped his shoulder.

"We're in on this together, Tom," he said evenly. "What you have sworn I'll back to the limit.

"But let's look the situation in the face. Sheila is still alive; of that I am certain. But Gautier has her and he's gone; and we can't follow him in the darkness. Yet I know that both of us will go crazy if we sit here and wait until daylight. Besides, Gautier will leave no trail this time—that is, no trail which anybody but a skilled Indian trapper can follow. He knows that he's got us at his mercy, that we won't try to leave the Upper Nesigak, and that winter will soon be at hand, which will cut off our last chance of escape. We can't find his trail and we can't follow him unless we do. Yet the inaction of waiting until daylight will kill us!"

His hand, resting on Ballard's shoulder, could feel the bigger man trembling, yet Morrison knew Ballard well enough to realize that this was not a sign of hopelessness or weakness; but simply the outward manifestation of a soul torn with agony.

"But I can follow him, Jim!" exclaimed Ballard. "I may not be able to see the trail he leaves, but no man can hate another as I hate Gautier, and not be led straight to him, as though a compass was pointing the way. He can't escape me even though he roams all over the Arctic. I'll—

"LISTEN!" Ballard broke off to speak the cautioning word. From somewhere close at hand came a groan.

"It's one of the outlaws!" cried Jim Morrison excitedly. "I wondered how it was that we missed every shot. They didn't dare to return the fire as they wanted to, either through fear of hitting one another or perhaps hitting Sheila."

"This way!" ordered Ballard softly. "And look out for a trap!"

Softly he moved in the direction whence came the sound. Then, gun at ready, he paused. Suddenly he threw the weapon to his shoulder.

"Strike a light, Jim!" he commanded. "I'll cover him!"

Morrison came up beside him and obeyed. Cupping his hands about the match he peered into the darkness, in the direction Ballard's gun was pointed.

"I see him!" he said at last. "I don't think it's a fake, either." He moved forward and bent over an object which lay behind a clump of brush. Suddenly he straightened up.

"Trayner!" he said wonderingly. "And he's wounded."

Ballard examined the fallen man. It was clear that Trayner was hard hit, for he lay as though dead. Ballard wondered, of course, how Trayner came to be there at all, for the man had lost his rifle after Jim Morrison had knocked him out. Beside the man's right hand was a wicked-looking knife, and at sight of it any regret which Ballard might have felt in shooting down an otherwise unarmed man, vanished. Armed with a knife and in the darkness Trayner was like some prowling cougar, ready to strike down its victim from behind.

Ballard kicked the knife out of the way and turned the wounded man over. By the light of another match, Ballard saw that Trayner's eyes were half-open. The wounded man was mumbling something Ballard could not understand save that he made out the words, "Gautier," and "Klunok." The eyes closed to open again more widely and stare up into Ballard's face, and then a sardonic grin twisted the outlaw's lips.

Ballard had made only a superficial examination of Trayner's wounds, but that examination had convinced the young man that the outlaw was near death. Suddenly Trayner spoke.

"Where's Gautier?" he asked in a hoarse whisper. "Where's that crazy Indian?"

"Gone," replied Ballard. Then, on sudden inspiration, he added:

"They left you behind here to die, Trayner."

But the outlaw smiled.

"Gautier got away with the girl," Trayner exulted. Apparently the effort brought him a fresh twinge of pain.

"But not far, Trayner," went on Ballard. "The big thing is that they left you behind—to die!"

The smile vanished from the outlaw's lips and he closed his eyes. When he opened them again, the flickering light from the match which Jim Morrison held above his head, showed an expression of fear in the man's face.

"They left you behind to die," Ballard stressed the thought.

"You lie!" retorted Trayner quickly. "I'm not going to die and Gautier will be back in a little while to get both of you!"

But Ballard shook his head.

"You know better than that, Trayner," he told the wounded man. "Gautier's not going to be bothered with you any longer. He knows that you'd only be a drag on him. So he left you here. You'll never see Gautier again. You've been a useful tool to him, but he needs you no longer."

Trayner sighed and then his face was contorted in new agony.

"Listen, Trayner," urged Ballard. "There's a chance for you to square yourself, after all. Tell me where Gautier and Klunok have taken Miss Morrison!"

Seemingly, the convincing ring in Ballard's words had an effect on the wounded man, although doubt still showed in the latter's face.

"Tell me the truth!" Ballard urged.

But Trayner suddenly laughed; a mirthless laugh which ended in a gasp.

"To hell with you!" he told Ballard. "Gautier was my friend, you'll never find your girl—until it's too late. . . . Gautier is my friend—he'll come back and get me. He'll—"

TRAYNER broke off, as a paroxysm seized him. When he opened his eyes, Ballard and Morrison had risen.

"All right, Trayner," said Ballard grimly. "You can die, then—alone, and in the dark. We're going on to find Gautier, and when we get him, we'll tell him that you stuck by him to the last. He'll laugh at that, because he knows, Trayner, that you're a fool!

"Come on, Jim!"

But as they were about to turn away, a cry from Trayner stopped them.

"Don't leave me!" begged the wounded man. "Stick by me a little while. See—I'm going fast. But I don't want to go

like this—alone, and in the dark!"

Yet Ballard only laughed harshly. He could not forget that it was Trayner who had helped Gautier spirit away Sheila Morrison, after shooting Kaska.

"Don't!" cried Trayner. "So help me, Ballard, I'll tell you all I know—if you'll keep the matches burning—awhile longer. I'm afraid—of things—in the dark. Ballard," and his voice rose to a wail, "don't go!"

Quickly, Ballard bent over him again, while Jim Morrison struck another match.

"You've got your chance, now, Trayner," the young man urged. "Take it!"

Trayner swallowed hard. The match burning between Morrison's fingers seemed to fascinate him.

"Klunok's cabin," he said with difficulty. "Not more than twenty miles from here—up that stream, beyond the painted cliffs. But you can't find it at night, and you'll never have a chance to get near it in the daytime. Klunok placed it so that he can see anybody coming before they get within two miles of him. Then—there's the wolf—a killer, like its master. That wolf—always watching."

He paused, and they could hear him breathing, almost fearfully, as the match went out and Morrison struck another.

"Your girl," continued Trayner, his voice dropped to a hoarse whisper, "you'll never see her again. Gautier plans—" But he broke off, as another spasm of pain seized him. When the agony passed, it was apparent that the coma which precedes death had arrived. He lay there with closed eyes, but still alive.

Ballard straightened, and looked at Jim.

"You heard what he said," Ballard declared in a queer voice. "He won't be able to tell more.

"Anyway, I'm not going to wait. Stay with him, Jim. It won't be long, in any event. If you don't find me before daylight, you can pick up my trail by the painted rocks."

The match burned out in Morrison's fingers. He heard Ballard moving swiftly away through the brush.

By instinct rather than by means of his five senses, Ballard held to the general direction which Trayner had indicated. It was improbable that Gautier believed pursuit would start before daylight. Even then, the outlaw could not have surmised that Ballard knew where Sheila would be found—assuming that Trayner had spoken the truth, which seemed logical. Therefore a slender advantage lay with Ballard and he was grimly determined to make the most of it. With the killing urge in him fully aroused, he moved rapidly through the woods like some hunting animal on the trail of prey.

He traveled as noiselessly as possible, yet the leaves which lay banked in windrows beneath the deciduous trees, as well as the matting of needles among the conifers, were brittle-dry and rustled to the tread of his feet. For weeks there had been no rain, and the snow had not arrived; hence the woods were like tinder despite the advanced season.

While Ballard strove to be as cautious as possible, he did not believe there was any real need for it. Gautier and Klunok would not be expecting him to follow until it was light enough to travel easily; hence they would have gone on to their rendezvous.

HOUR after hour he threaded through the forest, sometimes groping in the blackness where the trees stood close together, and at other times swinging along at a rapid stride as he crossed one of the high meadows. It seemed to him that his eyes had acquired a sort of night-seeing faculty which picked the best route for him. At last, it seemed to him that he detected light in the sky some distance ahead. This must be the first hint of dawn.

But on second thought he did not understand how it could be so, unless he had unwittingly become twisted as to directions. Dawn naturally would start in the southeast at this time of year; yet the light which he saw, and which grew amazingly even as he watched it, was in the north. But it seemed to concern him not at all, and he went on.

Presently, he was aware that down from the peaks toward which he was traveling, there breathed a cold wind, a hint of coming winter. Such a wind in the north at this time of year might easily portend a blizzard, and again he remembered the warning of the blazing sun-dogs in the

northland sky during the afternoon.

There was scant hope that he could accomplish that which he had set out to do; but he gave the thought no consideration. He was recklessly determined to rescue Sheila and square accounts with Gautier, no matter what price had to be paid.

The light in the sky grew rapidly, he observed. Moreover, it seemed to be stretching toward the horizon to right and left. He saw, too, that instead of the pearly glow which marks the false dawn, this was more of an angry glare in the sky. It was fiery red. Then, as a puff of breeze came more strongly to him, Ballard had sudden realization of what the sky-glare meant.

AHEAD, the woods were on fire! It was by no means an unusual thing in the heavily-forested regions of the north, even at this season of year, for the woods were tinder-dry and dangerous as a powder-magazine. A chance bolt of lightning might set the woods afire in a twinkling.

Yet Ballard knew there had been no electrical storm for weeks; therefore nature was not responsible for this incipient blaze. It could be nothing else than the work of Gautier!

Ballard paused, as understanding came to him. With the wind blowing in the face of the pursuer, Gautier would be running no risk himself in starting the blaze. Doubtless he had protected himself, anyway, by getting on the other side of the river, beyond the painted cliffs. His hope was not alone to turn back Ballard, but to trap the pursuer and consign him to a horrible death.

The threat of it held Ballard appalled. Yet he had no thought of turning back. No scheme which Gautier could devise would turn him back.

He struck off again, conscious that the smell of smoke was growing more and more pungent. Under the urge of the wind, the flames were sweeping directly toward him. The first snowfall would quench the blaze, but ere that happened, either Gautier or Ballad would be dead.

The chance by which he had wrung the truth from Trayner, as to where the outlaws had taken Sheila, stood Ballard in good stead now. He knew where his objective lay, and he could reach it by a circuitous route, to avoid the flames; whereas, had he blindly plunged forward, trusting to luck to overtake Gautier, he would most certainly have died, just as the giant outlaw had planned. It would be futile, however, to try to get through the fire directly.

But Ballard knew where the river lay. Once let him reach it, and he believed that he could penetrate the barrier of flame. Therefore, he swung sharply to the left, in which direction he knew the stream must lie.

Yet none too soon. Fanned by the strengthening breeze, the flames were sweeping closer and closer, until the dense clouds of smoke made it almost impossible for him to see his way. Nevertheless, the glow of the fire lighted the forest, and helped in that respect, at least.

Ballard was worried about Jim Morrison back there. Still, Morrison was an experienced woodsman now, and could doubtless take care of himself. Anyway, Ballard knew that he would have all that he could do himself to reach the river ahead of the fire, which seemed to be sweeping along the right bank of the stream. He plunged off through the woods.

For a time the ground was fairly level, although thickly-overgrown. But now it became more uneven, and he was aware that it pitched downward rather sharply. This indicated that not far ahead was the river, that he had already entered into the valley of the stream.

To his right, the fire was pressing closer; so close, indeed, that hot sparks from the flaming spruce trees, showered him steadily. But he was unafraid, knowing that the river could not be far ahead now. The ground fell away more steeply, until he was threading his way along the bottom of a canyon which must debouch into the river.

As he moved on, slowed somewhat by numerous windfalls which were strewn along the canyon, he saw the flames passing behind him on the higher ground, crossing the trail he had made. But he did not care, for safety lay ahead. Suddenly, he stopped stark, alarmed by what he saw.

FOR several minutes now he had been traveling down the canyon whose walls had grown precipitous, unscalable. But he had not doubted that presently, even above the roar of the fire, he would hear the roar of the stream. Now, however, he had come to a sheer drop-off which ended in blackness. The canyon had ended abruptly on the lip of a cliff. The river might be below—it *must* be, he reasoned—yet how far down the stream was, he had no way of knowing. Nor, indeed, did he know how he was going to get down to it.

He was trapped! Behind him the flames had cut off retreat; he could not climb the cliffs on either hand—and he apparently could not descend the cliff in front. Moreover, the air-currents drew the smoke down through the canyon until he was nearly blinded, and felt as though he must die of asphyxiation unless he got out of the place soon.

He took one more look at the flames behind him. They were moving with astonishing rapidity down the canyon. No chance to get through them. Safety, if it existed for him at all, lay ahead. There *must* be a way to get down! And he must find it quickly. But as he walked to the edge of the precipice and peered downward, he could see nothing but the black tops of rankly-growing spruce trees—maybe twenty feet below, maybe fifty, or even a hundred.

Just below the lip of the cliff, however, he saw a narrow ledge. At least he could get down this far; and once there, another ledge might be within reach. With renewed hope, therefore, he started downward.

He reached the ledge without difficulty, and was overjoyed to see another projection of rock just below. But he was in a precarious position, for the ledge was covered with vine-balsam, a hardy shrub which grew flat on the rock, its roots fastened to earth in a crevice. The balsam was as slippery as ice, and Ballard realized that a misstep here might mean death.

The smoke was eddying over the cliff now, choking him, and he knew that the situation was desperate enough to warrant any chance. Gripping a double-handful of the vine-balsam, after slinging his rifle by a strap over his shoulder, he gingerly let himself over the edge into the dark.

There he hung for an instant, while his feet groped for the rock below. Finding it at last, he loosed his hold above slightly, still unwilling to trust his full weight to the lower foothold. But as he did so, the vine-balsam which he was gripping, weakened by the strain which he had put upon it, suddenly gave way.

With a scream uttered involuntarily, he dropped, plunging into the blackness below.

XX

WHEN Sheila Morrison regained consciousness after her swoon, it was with the sensation of being jolted along through darkness over a rough trail. At first she had no clear conception as to what had happened; she remembered only that some kind of creature—it might have been the tame wolf, or it might have been the crazed Indian—was about to leap at her. Then merciful oblivion had come.

But now she was being carried in some kind of a rude hammock slung between the shoulders of two men. She half-lifted herself, and saw that ahead was a bent form, clad in shaggy skins, the poles of the hammock on his shoulders. Klunok! She would have screamed, had she not heard Gautier's voice—behind her!

"You are awake, ma'mselle?" he asked. She did not reply, but dropped her head again; and then she heard him give a brief command to Klunok. The two men came to a halt, and the hammock was lowered to the ground.

Gautier stood over her, in the gloom, and the girl would have risen had not her injured ankle given her a sharp twinge of pain. She fancied that Gautier was smiling.

"It is finished," said Gautier simply. "All is finished now, ma'mselle. Your lover, Ballard, and your brother—by this time they are dead. So, too, is poor Trayner, perhaps." Gautier shrugged, affected to sigh regretfully.

"Dead?" cried Sheila. "Tom Ballard and Jim—dead?"

Gautier nodded.

"This time I no lie to you, ma'mselle," he explained. "I make sure of eet.

"We cross the rivaire. Before we cross,

I set the woods on fire. Ballard and your brother, they try to follow. They get caught in fire—they die for sure." He bent lower over her and she could see his white teeth glisten as he smiled.

"Too bad, eh?" he asked. "But you are lucky girl, ma'mselle, to have real man like Cassiar Joe Gautier to look after you. Now we go to place where nobody can come until snow melts next spring. By that time, we be far away—into the north. You be wife of Cassiar Joe then, *hein?*"

He looked at her a moment, chuckling. But she said nothing, for no words would express her emotions at that moment. She believed that Gautier was in reality lying. When he said that Ballard and Joe Morrison were dead; nevertheless, there was a ring of sincerity in his words.

Gautier spoke again to Klunok, and once more they were under way, carrying the girl between them by means of the poles which they had lashed together with thongs of dried caribou-hide. It was an uncomfortable couch at best, but Sheila was too tormented with fears to complain. Her swollen ankle was paining her severely and even had she been given the opportunity, she would have had no chance to escape, for she could not walk.

On through the darkness they went and as they began to climb Sheila became aware that behind them, on the opposite bank of the river they had quitted, was a growing glare in the sky. Gautier had spoken truly, then, when he told of starting the forest-fire. She was sick at the thought of what had doubtless happened to Tom.

At last, after winding up a rocky trail, they halted and she was put down. Then Gautier was lifting her to her feet. Sheila saw that they were before the door of a small, low-roofed cabin, rudely constructed of logs and brush and thatched with poles on which had been shoveled a foot or more of earth. Klunok, with a grunt, opened the loose-hung door, and motioned them inside. Carrying her in his arms, for it was apparent that she could not walk, Gautier stooped as he entered the low doorway.

Presently Klunok struck a light, although the girl saw that dawn was at hand, that the eastern sky was graying. But inside the cabin, which apparently had no window other than a mere loophole in one end of the gable, it was still dark. Gautier placed the girl none too gently on the couch, which was covered with untanned pelts of wolf and beaver. Then both men ignored her, while they busied themselves getting food. Silently, the girl watched them.

The cabin had no stove, merely a crude fireplace. From a haunch of moose, which hung from a rafter Klunok cut off several thick slices of meat. These he stuck on spits before the fire which Gautier had started. Soon the meat was sizzling. But it was no more than fairly warmed through, when the Indian seized one of the slices and began to eat it ravenously, after the fashion of an animal. He made guttural sounds of pleasure as he ate.

Gautier, however, cooked a slice of meat more carefully and offered it to the captive, but she refused. The hardships which she had endured, as well as her mental suffering, had driven all desire for food from her mind. The outlaw shrugged and calmly proceeded to eat the meat himself.

Presently the meal was finished. There were no dishes to wash, no cleaning-up to do. Klunok merely wiped his greasy fingers on his clothing and squatted before the fire, studying the blaze. Gautier sat facing the girl and she felt his eyes upon her broodingly, although she sought to avoid his gaze. Daylight crept into the room—a thin, weak daylight, as though the clouds of smoke from the forest-fire had drawn an opaque screen across the sun. Suddenly Klunok, who seemed to be half asleep, raised his head quickly, in an attitude of listening.

Sheila listened, too, but heard no sound. Klunok, however, rose to his feet with an effortless, gliding motion and went to the door, which he threw open.

THE girl, involuntarily gasped at what she saw. The wolf was there; a great, shaggy brute whose jade-green eyes were instantly fixed upon her balefully. For an instant the wolf regarded her and it seemed to her that all the cruelty and ferocity of his nature was in his gaze. Then he looked up at Klunok, as though questioningly.

Suddenly the wolf wheeled and started

away; but only went a short distance before he stopped and looked back. Understanding shone in the Indian's eyes. In an Indian jargon, he said to Gautier:

"Talapus says an enemy comes!"

The girl, who understood something of the language which the Indian used, felt a queer thrill at his words. An enemy? That might be Tom Ballard, after all. Or perhaps her brother. Still, it might signify that the Mounties, who were undoubtedly on Gautier's trail by this time, were approaching. In any event, an enemy to Klunok and Gautier, was a friend to her, whoever it might be.

Gautier rose to full height, with a startled exclamation. He spoke rapidly to Klunok. Undoubtedly the wolf had not lied; but the two of them would go to make sure. Gautier turned on Sheila.

"If eet is M'sieu Ballard, which I ver' much doubt," the outlaw said with a grin, "then I shall be more fortunate than I hoped. We will bring him here and you shall see him die, ma'mselle." He turned again to Klunok and spoke briefly.

At his first words, that he and Klunok would set out to make sure who it was approaching, Sheila had felt a new thrill of hope. It meant that they would leave her behind, believing, doubtless, that she could not escape, crippled as she was. Yet it would give her an opportunity, nevertheless. But Gautier's later words shattered this hope.

"Talapus, the wolf, will stay to keep you company, ma'mselle," the outlaw went on with his leering grin. "Talapus will protect you—and see that you do not try to escape!"

Then he turned away, to pick up his rifle, Klunok doing likewise. The two men went out, but at the doorway Gautier lingered for a moment.

"Be warned, ma'mselle," he told her. "Do not try to run away, for the wolf will be waiting outside. He knows you for a stranger, and therefore an enemy." Gautier smiled again and was gone.

Alone, Sheila sat there motionless for a time. Then she got up, went to the door, which she opened cautiously, and peered out. Gautier had spoken the truth! Just outside sat the waiting wolf, as if hoping that she would try to escape.

In some manner, Klunok had made it apparent to the wolf that the latter must remain behind, to guard the girl. Probably the wolf considered her fair prey, providing that he could get at her through contact with man, the wolf had lost all natural fear of human beings and there was no question but that Talapus would attack the girl if given the opportunity.

Hastily, she slammed the flimsy door shut and sank down on her knees, as though overcome with the hopelessness of her predicament.

But after a time she arose again and went back to the couch. For several minutes she lay there thinking, trying to plan some method by which she could escape.

Her thoughts, too, were of Tom Ballard and her brother, Jim. Gautier had declared they were dead—yet the warning which the wolf had brought, indicated otherwise. Even then, however, Gautier and Klunok probably would ambush them. Good woodsmen though Tom and Jim were, they were as novices when compared to the two outlaws. Gautier would make certain of Ballard's death this time, if it were possible.

PRESENTLY Sheila was roused from her gloomy thoughts by a scratching sound at the door. Talapus! The wolf was trying to get inside.

Sudden fear swept the girl; the door was a flimsy thing at best, even as was the rest of the cabin. The savage, hungry beast outside, evidently became impatient over the fact that she did not attempt to escape, and likewise emboldened by the realization that the girl was afraid of him, was trying to force an entrance.

Horrified, Sheila saw the loosely-barred door sag slightly as Talapus worked at it with his jaws, and she heard the splintering of wood as he sought to wrench loose the frame-work of the panel.

She rushed at the door, shouting to frighten the wolf. For a moment he paused; then, apparently understanding what she was trying to do, he began working at the door once more. With his strong jaws he would tear off splinters and each time he did so, bracing his feet against the door, it seemed that the frail contrivance would crash inward.

Fearfully, Sheila looked about the place

for a weapon of some kind; but there was nothing, save a stick of wood in front of the fireplace. This would be a puny cudgel at best, to fight off the attack of the savage brute in case it did break down the door, which he would surely do unless Gautier or Klunok arrived soon. She screamed their names, but heard no sound in reply save the steady grinding of the wolf's jaws on the door-frame.

Sheila had believed that she had already prepared herself to meet death—yet death in the form which confronted her now, awoke a new desire to live. She could not bear to contemplate the dread moment when the half-famished beast would break inside, overpower her. Again and again she called the names of Gautier and Klunok. She found herself calling on Tom Ballard, but knew that it was a waste of breath. There was nobody to hear, nobody to help her.

Within a few minutes at best, the persistence of the grim, gray slayer would be rewarded. The door would give way; Talapus would leap inside, and mete out a death as swift as it would be horrible. Sheila fought with an almost overwhelming desire to swoon; but she realized that she must not, that she needed every faculty alert and ready for the moment when the wolf broke into the cabin.

That steady splintering of the door, that grim gnawing, suggestive of powerful jaws and fangs, continued. The methodical silence of the beast was what made the situation doubly terrifying. Wolf-like, Talapus would make his kill in silence, even as he forebore now to growl and rage at the obstructing door, as a dog would have done.

The shaggy beast concentrated wholly upon getting through the panel within the shortest possible space of time, as though he realized the need for haste, that he must do his work before either of the men returned.

Anxiously, the girl looked around the room, hopeful of discovering some way to forestall the beast. She might, by dint of much effort, loosen one of the logs, and get outside, her hope being to reach a tree which she could climb and remain there until Klunok or Gautier returned. But it would be a highly hazardous feat to attempt. Talapus would hear her and would head her off before she could gain a tree.

The only thing to do was to remain in the cabin and, failing to find some way of successfully battling the wolf, pray that help would come.

SUDDENLY, she saw a ray of hope. The log walls were rough and uneven enough for her to climb. The roof was low, but she believed that she could scale the wall until she could reach the rafter. There she would cling and, while she would not be out of the way of the wolf, who could leap up at her, she might at least fight him off by means of the club. It would be better than attempting to battle him on the floor. Grasping the stick, she bravely attempted the climb.

It would have been difficult even though she did not have a sprained ankle, but now it was almost an impossibility. Yet fear gave her strength, drove her to new effort.

Painfully slow, yet determinedly, she worked her way upward, gripping the unbarked logs and stifling a scream of agony as she put weight on her injured foot. Now she clung almost in the peak of the roof, her feet resting on a log in the wall, while her left hand stayed her by holding fast to the rafter. With her right hand, she gripped the club.

How long she could maintain this perilous position, there was no way of telling, save that it could not be more than comparatively brief. Had she been a less courageous girl than she was, she would have fainted long ago; but Tom Ballard himself, who won his battles by stronghearted determination, would have glorified in her resolve at this moment. Breathlessly she clung there, waiting.

Nor did she have to wait long. There was a splintering crash from the door as the frame-work sagged and fell outward. Then she glimpsed the long nose, the pointed ears, the cruel face of the killer wolf.

Only for an instant he surveyed her. Then, with a lurch of his body, he shoved aside the remains of the door and stepped inside. She saw him crouch, almost beneath her; saw his muscles tense for the leap. Her lips moving swiftly in prayer,

the girl gripped her club more tightly and set herself.

Suddenly she saw him coming, launched like a gray thunderbolt, ears laid back and jaws half-opened, exposing his white fangs. She swung wildly with the club.

But the movement dislodged her. She felt her hand slipping. Then she was falling. Yet as she dropped, she put her last strength into a single, tremendous blow. Whether it landed or not, she could not know, for the oblivion against which she had fought so long, came with merciful swiftness.

XXI

IN that downward plunge in the darkness, Tom Ballard felt that death had overtaken him at last. So suddenly and unexpectedly had it happened that he was given no time to prepare himself. In the fractional part of a second when he was dropping, it seemed that he lived an eternity. The wind whistled about his ears; something smote him a stunning blow; there was a succession of shocks . . . and then dazed, although still conscious, he was aware that he was at the bottom.

Just what had happened, he could not understand at first; the only thing which concerned him was that, somehow, he had been miraculously spared. Yet he was fearfully bruised, although no bones were broken.

Looking upward, he saw that the face of the cliff was not so steep as it had appeared from above. All about him were countless thousands of little spruce trees and these, growing so closely together that a man could scarcely force his way through them, had broken his fall.

He had in reality done no more than slip off a shelf, a drop of perhaps twelve feet before striking a sand-slide, and then the tangle of young spruce. From the lip of the cliff above, the canyon had seemed bottomless, but he knew now that this was merely an illusion.

Wearily, he got to his feet, glad that he was still able to walk, although a groan was involuntarily wrung from his lips as his battered muscles and bones protested. Still he must not tarry here. Gautier still had Sheila captive and if Ballard was to be in time, he must hurry.

But ere he started off through the spruce jungle, he sought to take his bearings. The river was just below him now, he surmised, for the steady murmur of it came clearly to him. The direction he must take, therefore, was to the right.

He struck off, while above him the smoke-clouds from the forest-fire rolled impotently across the valley. Hurt though he was and with his old wound paining him afresh, Ballard nevertheless reveled in the thought that he had thus far outwitted Gautier. Moreover, he vowed that he would outwit him at the end. Gautier would believe him dead by now, or at least turned back by the flames. It was scarcely possible that the outlaw would be expecting Ballard to turn up again. As rapidly as he could force his way through the tangle of trees, Ballard went on.

Presently he was aware that daylight was breaking. Moreover, he was leaving the worst of the fire behind, although the right bank of the river, whose course he was following, was still a mass of smoking embers, kept alive by the steady breeze from the heights. But the fresh forefront of the blaze had swept behind him for several miles, and it would keep on until it was blocked by a river or the first blizzard quenched the fire.

Again Ballard's thoughts returned to young Jim Morrison. There was no telling whether Sheila's brother had escaped the fire, but Ballard had confidence that Jim had not been caught napping. He would know what to do under the circumstances, whereas an ordinary *chechahco* might perish miserably. In any event, Ballard could be of no help to him now.

Still further, Ballard wondered what part the Mounted Police were playing in this drama which was being so rapidly unfolded. He had known that the Mounties were in pursuit of Gautier, but sometimes the Law can be a cumbersome, unwieldy thing.

It seemed highly improbable that the Mounties were any nearer Gautier than Ballard was at this moment. Efficient though they were under most circumstances, Tom Ballard saw no chance that they could be of help now. His affair with Gautier must surely be settled before they came up.

Presently, he swung closer to the river,

finding that the going was better down there. Although the smoke-clouds overcast the sky, the sun was now up, a red ball of fire whose weak rays lightened the gloom. Still going upstream, as Trayner had told him, Ballard kept on; and at last he saw looming before him the painted cliffs where he had found the rich gold deposit and where Gautier had tried to kill him.

Ballard paused, then, for he knew that Klunok's cabin was not much farther, unless Trayner had lied. Standing there, staring up at the cliffs, Ballard at last saw movement in the brush above. He sank down, gripping his gun, and believing that Klunok or Gautier would appear. But all he saw was the wolf, or one which looked to be the same animal which had been trailing Klunok, and which the Indian had evidently tamed.

TALAPUS stood there on the brink, nose lifted, as he sampled the air, which was acrid with smoke. He was not more than three hundred yards distant, and Ballard was strongly tempted to shoot, but realized that it would be unwise, for the sound of the gun would doubtless alarm Gautier and Klunok. Suddenly the wolf stiffened and from where he was hidden, Ballard could see the hackles, or long hair about the wolf's shoulders, lift slightly.

Ballard knew what this signified. Either the wolf had seen him, or had winded him. Again the man was tempted to shoot, but ere he could do so, the wolf vanished.

Somehow, the occurrence had added to Ballard's uneasiness. The wolf was so closely associated with Klunok and Gautier, that the creature seemed to be one of the outlaws. Ballard naturally was unafraid of the wolf, but the discovery had grave possibilities. Rising from the covert, he pushed on more rapidly than before.

Minutes fled swiftly, until Ballard felt that he must be close to his objective. He could see no sign of Klunok's cabin, yet if Trayner had spoken the truth, the shack was not far away; moreover, its occupants doubtless would see him approaching, unless they had grown careless, thinking that he had perished in the fire.

He decided to take the bold risk of crossing the river, to gain the heights on the opposite side, from which point the cabin must surely be visible. A convenient log-jam gave him footing over the swiftest part of the stream; and thereafter he plunged boldly into the current.

He had gained the foot of a great slide on the opposite bank and was just starting up, when he felt the wind of a bullet and, on the heels of it, a snapping report of a rifle. At the same instant he saw the head and shoulders of Gautier above him.

Throwing up his gun, he fired instinctively; there was no time to aim. But at the shot, he saw Gautier vanish. Still with gun ready, Ballard swiftly climbed a few feet, then paused to fire again, for Gautier had reappeared.

Again he did this, but the next time, Gautier was too quick for him. The outlaw fired and Ballard knew that he had been hit. Yet it was but a slight flesh wound, although the bullet had come dangerously close to tearing through his chest. As it was, the missile had merely flicked through his shirt, under his left arm-pit.

He fired once more and quickly Gautier replied, his bullet striking low and filling Ballard's eyes with sand. Again Ballard shot, then climbed a few feet and took refuge behind a rock while he jammed more cartridges into the gun.

A more prudent man might have halted then and there to shoot it out with Gautier. But Ballard had thrown caution to the winds. One determination gripped him—that he would carry Gautier's position by direct assault or die in the attempt. Gun reloaded, he poked the barrel around the rock and half-lifted himself, watchful for Gautier's appearance. As Ballard did so, there came from the left, another shot and his arm went numb. Klunok!

From two points their fire was converging upon him. Ballard returned that shot, although his left arm felt as stiff and unwieldy as though it was made of lead. Whether he made a hit he could not tell. He had time only to slew his gun around again, and fire a second time, to avoid being murdered by Gautier.

But Ballard had gained another twenty feet and, although he was wounded, only death itself could have stopped him now.

Indeed, he felt that grimly his will would carry him on to the top even though his brain no longer controlled his body. Not far now—and he shot once more.

But Gautier had fired at the same time and the bullet, ricocheting from the rock beside Ballard, half-blinded him with particles of grit. Moreover, it drove the last vestige of reason from him, so that he fired and fired, until the click of the firing-pin told him the gun was empty. All the while he climbed, hugging the rocks as well as he could, yet ever firing. And his last shot seemed to have a peculiar effect.

GRAVEL was sliding swiftly toward him. A landslide! Wounded, maddened though he was, he had yet sense enough to roll aside, to avoid being under the boulder which he felt was coming, and which had doubtless been dislodged by Gautier. What he did was instinctive, for his brain seemed incapable of reason at that moment. But through the fog of bewilderment, it seemed that he heard a cry. He focused his attention, with an effort, above him.

What he saw was indeed a landslide coming, but with a dust-covered object in the van, an object which moved—waved arms—and cried out!

Gautier! Either through accident or his eagerness to get a better shot at Ballard, the outlaw had leaned too far over the cliff. Loose earth had broken away and before he could draw back he was falling. Moreover, he was wounded, for not all of Ballard's shots had gone wild.

Even while the situation impinged upon Ballard's dazed consciousness, the thing happened. Gathering momentum, as it gathered fresh earth, the slide rolled downward. In a flash Gautier, still screaming, was gone; while a mass of loose rock and gravel thundered upon him and continued to pile up at the bottom. The cliff-side where Ballard clung, trembled in sympathy, as though a fresh slide would start. But the rock behind which he lay, was deeply imbedded in the soil and remained fast.

Gautier was gone! Dead—buried under tons of rock and earth. But there was still the crazed Indian with whom Ballard must reckon. As the dust-cloud rose up from the bottom, Ballard started upward again.

Moreover, no more shots came from Klunok, wherever he might be. Yet there was no time to marvel at this fact; Ballard merely accepted it and continued to fight his way upward. He gained the summit at last, more dead than alive, and paused there while his dazed brain tried to grasp that which his eyes saw.

To the right, not more than three hundred yards distant, was a cabin, which must be Klunok's. But to the left, at the rim of the canyon, Ballard saw something else.

It was the shaggy figure of Klunok, bent low, and scuttling from rock to rock, pausing only to fire at some enemy behind. From where he lay, Ballard could see that enemy, or rather, many of them

Men in red coats—the Mounties! Other men, dressed in the rough but serviceable clothes of northern trappers and woodsmen. It seemed that Ballard could see Tomlinson, although he could not be sure. Yet he understood what had happened, what was happening now.

Coming up the unburned side of the river, the Mounties had surprised Klunok. Perhaps Gautier had seen them, too, and his desire to be revenged upon Ballard, had driven him to take a losing chance. In any event, they were pressing the crazed Indian.

Once more Klunok turned to fire at them; then boldly ran. But ere he had taken a dozen steps, he saw Ballard, saw the latter's rifle swing. . . . What Klunok did then stuck fast in Ballard's recollection for years afterward. For the Indian stopped, as though undecided; looked back at the Mounties pursuing him, then at Ballard, whose lips were already framing the command to surrender. Then, with an animal-like cry, he flung his arms wide, raced toward the brink of the cliff, and leaped—into space!

Ballard lowered his gun. He could not see what happened below, nor would he have trusted himself to look. Instead, he straightened up, and, weaving on his feet, started for Klunok's cabin.

For Ballard had heard something which set his nerves tingling. Sheila's voice—raised in a cry for help!

XXII

HOW he ever covered that distance so rapidly, wounded as he was, Ballard could never understand. But he found himself at the door of the cabin, heard his own voice, as though from afar, calling the girl's name.

And he heard her reply.

"The wolf!"

Dulled as his senses were by the ordeal through which he had passed, his mind failed to grasp the situation instantly. He saw the broken door, heard Sheila crying again; and then he was galvanized into action. But ere he could leap inside, he saw framed in the opening the shaggy form of the gray killer. For an instant beast and man regarded each other. In that fleeting moment Ballard saw that the beast's head was bloody, that it was hurt. Sheila's blow had been a lucky one and the wolf had been partially stunned.

Yet now at sight of the man, whom Talapus knew for an enemy, the beast seemed to revive with astonishing quickness. Silently, it sprang for the throathold.

The thing happened with such suddenness that Ballard was all but caught unaware. In that moment, he forgot who or what he was. Although he had in his hands a serviceable rifle, it did not occur to him to use it as such. In one fell instant, he underwent an atavism; he became a club-armed man from the Dawn of Time. He swung the gun as he would have swung a bludgeon, a powerful, sidewise blow.

It caught the wolf on the side of its head; yet the animal had struck so abruptly that its jaws were within a few inches of Ballard's throat when the blow landed. Had the wolf caught the full force of the swinging gun-muzzle, the beast would have been brained. As it was, the gray killer merely fell, stunned.

And then and there Ballard did a thing which proved that his atavism was, for the moment, complete. He would have struck again, but found that the first blow had broken the gun across the thin plates covering the mechanism. Hurling the useless weapon aside, he fell upon the dazed wolf with bare hands, just as the killer weaved to its feet.

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Had Talapus been in full possession of his senses, not even Ballard, powerful though the man was, could have held him. But the wolf was half-stunned. Nevertheless, it had enough life in it to fight. Writhing in Ballard's grip, it slashed the man's forearm to the bone, so that the blood instantly reddened his hand.

But Ballard did not relax his hold, which was like unto the grip of a bulldog. Bowing his head to protect his eyes from the slashing strokes of the beast's feet, the man all but buried his face in the wolf's fur, while he continued to hang on and tighten his grip relentlessly.

Now he knew that the end could not be far away, for the agonies of the wolf told him that it was dying. Nevertheless, he was near exhaustion himself. Before his eyes seemed to swim a raw, red mist; while in his brain there kept hammering the thought that he *must* hang on—*must* hang on—

With a last dying effort, the wolf again threw the man off-balance and the two of them rolled upon the ground.

The red mist swam more rapidly before his eyes. Indeed, it seemed to have resolved itself into a swift-flowing stream. It seemed that he was drowning, that his only hope of safety lay in keeping his grip fast on something—what it was he could not tell at that moment—yet something which meant life or death to him. He *must* hang on—*must* hang on—

THEN the dream changed and he found himself half-sitting up, with Sheila's arms about his neck, while she was covering his face with kisses and calling him endearing names. But through this pleasantness shot remembrance of the wolf and he would have fought his way blindly to his feet, had not other arms—stronger ones—held him fast. He opened his eyes.

He saw that he was still outside the cabin, where he had fought the wolf. But now Sheila was with him. And here, too, were the Mounties, the trappers. Tomlinson. Jim Morrison. All were looking at him, half-wonderingly.

"Tom," said the fur company man feelingly, "are you sure that you're alive? You look, well—as though you might have been murdered seven times over!"

And no doubt he did. Wounded, bullet-riddled, and slashed in his battle with the wolf. The wolf! Ballard's eyes glanced around quickly. Twenty feet from where he stood, was the stiffening form of Talapus.

Well, Klunok was dead. And so was Gautier. Here was Sheila, miraculously restored to him once more. Involuntarily, his arms went around her, for he felt dizziness coming upon him again. As from afar, he heard Jim Morrison's voice.

"Trayner died right after you left. I saw the fire coming, struck for the river and got across. Just before daylight, I met the Mounties. We heard the firing and came up as quickly as we could."

But Ballard had no ears for explanations. In fact, it seemed that he was unaware of those around him. Unaware of all, except Sheila.

"Next spring," he told her, as though the others could not hear, "we'll come back here and spend our honeymoon; and get the gold. Just the two of us, Sheila."

Gray, the sky was, gray and threatening. As he stood with uplifted face, Ballard felt the first snowflakes on his cheek and saw, bearing down out of the north, the opaque white wall of the first blizzard.

The warning of the blazing sun-dogs had been fulfilled at last! Quick work would be needed to get over the divide before the snow became too deep. Tom Ballard silently gave thanks that winter had waited for him to accomplish that which he had set out to do.

A Fiction House Magazine

LONG-KNIFE LAW

By A. DeHERRIES SMITH

Burke and Carnes were carrying scarlet-tunic law into the red man's wilderness—straight into a long-knife doom set by a renegade white.

Carnes staggered from the shocking blows.

THE Lake of Calling Spirits was smooth and still. A strange hush lay over the fringe of woods about it. The high red sun overhead cast a coppery sheen on the tiny ripples which the west wind caused. At the bottom of the lake, odd-shaped shadows moved in a dizzying maze.

A flock of gray-feathered geese gabbled quietly near one shore, preening their

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feathers, and searching for water spiders. The chattering of the squirrels, which had raised a minor pandemonium in the tops of the spruce trees, had quieted into an expectant lull.

Suddenly an old gander, on sentry, flapped his wings furiously and let out a warning squawk, lifting himself into the air on his wide wings. The other geese honked an alarmed chorus, and accompanied by swirls of white water, climbed into the safety of the air.

Ducks, which a moment before had nosed along the reedy shores with the subdued quacking of content, dived or scuttled further into the bullrushes for shelter. The squirrels screamed their hatred from the security of their tree-tops.

Man, *the destroyer,* had come!

Two humped figures in a birchbark canoe hurtled about a long point, shooting their vessel across the lake with long, deeply driven strokes. Time and again Joel Kaster's stubbled face turned backwards over his dirty gray shirt, narrowed eyes peering beyond the rippling wake left by the canoe.

"Awas! Awas!" Kaster urged the half-breed in the bow, as the man wheeled to glare behind. "Move or I'll—" With an oath the big man jerked his dripping paddle out of the water. He slammed the blade across the 'breed's sweating back, laughing to himself when white spray spurted in reply.

"It's the Mounted Police, I tell you," Kaster panted in Cree, after another fleeting glance backward. "Go on there; shove her along! We have 'em buffaloed now. Cripes, it makes me laugh. *Awas! Awas!"*

TWO scarlet blurs bending over swirling paddles had flashed into Kaster's range of vision. The trader laughed deep down in his great hairy chest at the spray spurting from the blades, and the long reaching strokes that sent the police canoe leaping across the water.

A revolver bullet droned past Kaster's canoe, and again the trader's wide shoulders shook in silent laughter.

"All right, Semak," he growled at the 'breed. "Ease off, and mind you act kinda mad when these guys come up. They're runnin' their snouts right into where we wants 'em. Poor boobs thinks they're huntin' us! Heh-heh-heh. When you an' me comes back from the North there'll be two less of the yaller-legged ginks to monkey with the fur trade. I has it fixed for 'em this time, believe me."

Kaster swung the canoe about with a swirling stroke, then threw the dripping blade across the little craft, squatting motionless; waiting.

The police canoe gained more swiftly.

Now he could make out Constable Andrew Burke's face glaring at him from the oncoming canoe's bow; behind him, Sergeant Carnes' tall frame and sun-tanned features outlined against the gleaming water.

"What's the idea, Kaster? Don't you know enough to stop on a signal? You heard me call you, back there beyond the point," Carnes panted, as the other vessel shot up and the sergeant grasped the trader's gunwale. He leaned across towards the other man, gray eyes hard, brown hair clinging to his temples with the sweat coursing down over the lean face.

"What's the idea, eh?" Kaster countered. "Can't I navigate around in this darned country without you guys chasin' after me? You got nothin' on me, Carnes, an' you know it."

The two glared eye to eye while the birchbarks rocked gently with the Mounties' labored breathing. Kaster half raised his paddle as though to shove the police canoe away, then thought better of it.

"Ma foi! This is a free countree, not? *Sacre,* but this I say to you—" Semak the 'breed commenced; yellow face frowning in remembrance of his master's instructions.

"You close that bean-trap," Burke cut in on him, reaching a thick arm forward and grasping the other canoe. "I ain't no Tunney, an' right now I'm squattin' in the middle of seventeen Turkish baths. Just the same there'll be half a dozen widows mournin' their loss if you let another bleat out of you. Let's have a little of the strong, silent men of the North stuff. Thanks, darling."

"Look, Kaster, you know why I followed you, and you understand what I want," the sergeant rumbled, waving a slim brown hand at Burke for silence. "Where's Kakiyaw and his tribe?" he went

on, still staring at the other man. "Those Indians have to be brought into Fort Chippewayan for the annual treaty payment. If they don't arrive in time to get the government food supplies half of them will starve next winter. Where are they?"

"Holy Jerusalem! Why ask me that?" the trader queried, spitting indignantly overside. "What do I know about old Kakiyaw an' his gang? Your job is looking after the Chippewayans; not mine. You guys have plenty of time—go an' look for 'em if you feels like it. Likely they're up to the Kayette lakes, fishin'. If that's all you wants, lift your mitt off my canoe. I gotta work for a livin'."

Carnes took no notice of the request, long fingers still gripping the birchbark's side. The little craft trembled with the suppressed passion that welled down through the Mountie's muscles. Semak uttered a grunting cry of alarm.

"Listen, Kaster," the sergeant gritted through clenched teeth, after a pause. "I know you're keeping those Indians out in the Barren Lands for some reason. You've had your fingers in several dirty messes north of the Athabasca, and when I get this thing cleaned up I figure on getting you a free trip to the Prince Albert jail. Savvy that?"

"You will, eh?" The trader's booming laugh evidenced his contempt. "I know all about you, too, Mister Mountie. Plenty complaints goin' into headquarters. Gotta show some life or you loses them three gold stripes. Leggo that canoe or maybe I'll send in a report, too; about interferin' with the fur trade. Remember we fellas has some pull at Ottawa."

Burke half rose to his feet, freckled features flaming, only to be pulled back by the white-faced sergeant. Carnes made no reply to Kaster's taunt. He knew only too well that what the man had said was true in the main. He must solve these mysteries which had been baffling the force all summer—or make way for someone who could.

THE sergeant sat glumly silent when the two traders dipped their paddles and sent the birchbark sliding over the gleaming water. Once Kaster's grimy face turned backwards over his shoulder and Carnes caught the flash of yellow teeth. The man was laughing.

"Get under way, Andy," the sergeant ordered curtly. "Head for the Long Portage."

They paddled steadily on under beetling cliffs and branching spruce woods, hour after hour; until at length Carnes' quick eyes caught the high summit of a granite hill rearing above them. He pointed his paddle to where a rough path had been chopped through the thickets running down to the lake. Burke nodded, turning the canoe toward the portage trail, eyes still sweeping the lake's wide expanse.

"Those hombres must have turned off into one of the channels leading west," the constable suggested over his thick shoulder. "No sign of the little dears. Well, one of these times I'm goin' to knock that slink Semak for a row of rusty beer cans. However, I guess I'll have to restrain my youthful impetuosity until we grab those infernal Indians."

"Huh-huh," Carnes grunted absently, as the canoe's bow slid up on the rocks. "Make a fire, Andy; guess the flies will be pretty bad in here."

"These 'skeeters would sure chew the face off a brass cat," the constable growled a few minutes later.

He threw a handful of moist moss on the campfire and in response to the movement a thick column of white smoke welled up. The two Mounties crouched over it, endeavoring to rid themselves of the winged pests that filled the air.

"Well, where do we go from here?" Burke's cheerful voice came again. "The treaty payin' party will be at Fort Chippewayan in a week an' we gotta have the Indians back there by then. No handouts for the nitchies an' we gets a swift kick from the paternal government. What's the program, Dickie?"

"Don't quite know," the sergeant replied slowly, tapping at his moccasin with a twig. "Guess we'll have to work on what Kaster said about the natives being up around Kayette lakes. Say, can you figure out any reason why he should want to keep the Indians out in the bush? Darned if I can. It's to his interest for the natives to bring their furs to the post for trade, isn't it?"

"Sure is. Anyhow—oh, shucks," Burke

droned, settling himself where the smudge blew over his head.

"You can just wake up before you go to sleep, Burke," the sergeant laughed, getting to his feet. "This is going to be a forced march, flies or no flies. Load the canoe on your stalwart shoulders and we'll investigate La Longue Portage. Mosey now!"

A few minutes later the two men left the lake, trudging upward through the sand and jackpines, to the rock slopes marking the Arctic watershed.

As they left the shore a figure slipped out from the trees across the water. The man cupped hands to his mouth, and three times the rutting call of a bull-moose boomed out.

"Moo-waugh-yu! Moo-waugh-yu!"

The cry was answered from the timber toward which the two Mounties struggled!

LOADED with Burke's heavy revolver as well as his own, the camp kit, blankets, and paddles, Carnes stumbled up the sharp incline. Sweat streamed down his face as he vainly battled with the hovering clouds of bulldog flies. Groans and curses from behind told him that Andy too was flecked with blood from the savage insects' attacks.

An hour's climbing through the slippery sand and the ridge crest was reached. The Mounties passed through scattered pines, descending until they came to the spruce woods on the lower slopes.

The sergeant waited for Burke to shuffle up, bathed in sweat and still cursing. Carnes did not pause, and despite Andy's plaintive groans struck out at once. He finally came to a halt where a second trail joined the one he was following.

"Whee-whoo!" A low whistle of surprise from Carnes. The nose of the canoe bumped into his back as he stood stock still, allowing the load he was carrying to slide off his shoulders. Dimly aware of Andy's grunt of satisfaction as he lowered the canoe to the ground, the sergeant's eyes remained fixed on some white object lying on the trail that led to the north.

Carnes bent down, picking up two willow sticks. These had been peeled, and lashed together in the shape of a cross, with strips of bark. Then he jumped erect to stare about him at the forest. No sounds of human life came to his ears. There was nothing but the soft swishing of the barrens' eternal winds in the tufted tops of the spruce, and the distance-mellowed calling of a moose.

He turned back to Burke, holding out the cross. "Know what that is?" he asked.

"Indian model of a waffle-iron," Andy suggested, fanning his round, red face vigorously. He waved the totem aside and threw himself down on the moss. Dick could untangle the thing if he wanted; too darned hot to dazzle his brains with nitchie cross-word puzzles. Most of the Chippewayans were nuts, anyhow.

Indian sign meaning "Do not take the trail!" the sergeant told the other man, still turning the tied sticks over and over. "Someone is trying to keep us from going north and that's just the very reason we're going that way. Load up the canoe and—"

Carnes broke off suddenly. He dropped the cross of willow withes and went ahead on the northern trail for about half a dozen paces; then got down on his hands and knees.

With Andy's puffing breath on his shoulder, the sergeant pointed to a rawhide cord stretched tautly across the narrow pad!

The cord was practically the same color as the forest floor. It was raised just high enough to meet a heedless foot, and by reason of its hue not likely to be observed by a casual eye.

"Give me that long tracking line out of the pack," Carnes ordered.

Andy fumbled for it, found the cord, and passed it over. The sergeant carefully tied one end to the rawhide, and when both men had walked back to where the packs lay, gave the line a sudden jerk.

The response was immediate. A reverberating crash shook the woods when a heavy log crashed across the trail, sending up clouds of dry earth and particles of moss.

"Suffering Susie! A bear deadfall, eh?" Burke whistled. "Queer place to stick one; right in the middle of a traveled trail."

"Yes, isn't it?" Carnes queried softly. He was looking down at the cross of twigs, one hand slap-slapping at his thigh. "Pretty slick, eh? Someone up here knew my habits darned well, Andy. Figured I was obstinate enough to kick the warning aside and charge right into that trap. Just luck

I didn't, too. White man's brains here. Kaster arranged it, if I know anything. This means war to the knife; he'll stick at nothing."

Without being told, the constable swung the canoe up on his shoulders. Carnes was already half a dozen yards down the trail.

A FEW minutes later and the two men were in the canoe once more, paddling across the long lake misty with the heat fog drawn from the water by the hot sun. Carefully watching the steep red banks closing in on the canoe, the sergeant finally vented a grunt of satisfaction when his eyes picked out a tall spruce trimmed of all its branches but a tuft at the extreme top. Carnes headed directly for the lobstick.

There followed a back-breaking portage to another bare ridge, through clouds of flies. On the crest the sergeant thankfully threw down the packs, sweeping an arm to the panorama before him; to the rolling rock ridges and the Barrens' myriad lakes.

"Sure jazzy," Andy panted, glancing up at Carnes' shining face. "Fine collection of rocks; about ten million acres of them. Why the delight?"

By way of reply the sergeant caught his comrade, forcing his head down until finally Burke's eyes glimpsed thin columns of smoke welling up from the score of teepees perched on a lake shore far below.

"The lost tribe, old-timer!" Carnes' soft voice came triumphantly. "There's the temporary abode of Kakiyaw, great and noble Chief of the Pastagan!"

"Gosh! Guess it is, all right. No other Indians out here in the Barrens now; all beat it into the post for the treaty payments," Burke admitted. "But how the devil did you—"

"No mystery about it at all," the sergeant broke in. "There are only two canoe trails leading from the Long Portage; one to the Kayette and one to the Ministic. I followed the one blocked by the bear-trap and naturally it brought us here; couldn't take us anywhere else unless we were tenderfoots."

He glowered down at the camp below, paused, then went on again, "If we had obeyed that Indian trail sign and sheered off to the Kayette we could have traveled around all summer and got nothing out of it but mosquito bites. Kaster had it well figured out; we'd either get killed by the deadfall, or take the wrong trail."

"Huh-huh. Sounds simple," Burke grunted. "Got a hunch, though, that it's too darned easy. Think Kaster would have let us wander this far if he really wanted to keep us away from the Indians?"

"Going to find that out," Carnes replied shortly. "Come on; let's get moving."

The faint path marking the portage to the Ministic was as steep as a flight of stairs. The two Mounties were compelled to double up on the loads. First the canoe was carried to the water, then the packs and camp gear.

Fighting for footholds on the slippery rocks, and hanging on by the bushes clinging to the cliff face, the task was finally completed. Then the men douched their faces and hands in the icy water, bathing the cuts where the vicious bulldog flies had driven their beaks into the sun-hardened skin.

Thus it was that neither man observed the face watching them from behind a clump of alder bushes!

Kaster grinned to himself when the police canoe was floated and had commenced traveling toward a long, spruce-covered point screening the Indian camp. A well-baited trap was set in the Indian teepees and the fool Mounties were running their heads right into it! The trader silently congratulated himself that very soon now there would be two Red Coats less in the North.

A contemptuous moccasin thudded on the 'breed's back. The man jumped to his feet in reply to the unspoken command. He hurriedly commenced loading the canoe, hidden by the overhanging bushes.

THE two Mounties paddled until the point slid past and a score or more of smoky teepees were revealed against a background of red rocks and scattered trees that sheltered in the valley from the Barrens' winds.

"Was there any cats in this man's country, guess they'd be streaking up those trees," Burke suggested as the sergeant stopped paddling.

Carnes eyed the howling horde of dogs

on the beach. With wolf tails flagging, the huskies raced back and forth, baying at the canoe. The pointed ears were pricked, the wicked triangular faces wreathed in venom.

"Uh-huh. The cats would rattle their claws all right," the sergeant agreed. "There's a bunch of bad actors, Andy; half mad with hunger, I guess. Your gat loaded?"

The constable nodded, slapping his hip. Carnes drove the paddle down again and once more the police canoe commenced to slip through the glassy water.

The two men beached the canoe in time to a devil's chorus from the dogs. Each man armed himself with a driftwood club from the littered beach, and then shoulder to shoulder they set out for the teepees; hemmed in by a leaping, baying horde.

Andy suddenly darted out, slamming with his club at a flat head that had driven nearer to his legs than was comfortable. A shrill yelp came from the dog as the animal tumbled down, great furry paws kicking.

Something was wounded and dying! The huskies' wicked natures thrilled to the thought. In a second tawny mass of writhing backs and flourishing tails poured over the wounded animal. Slashing fangs rent the unfortunate brute asunder. As the two Mounties strode forward a babel of hellish sounds told them that the starving dogs were feeding at last.

Indians were grouped about the teepees, watching the oncoming men but making no signs of recognition. Andy flashed Carnes an amused glance when several children ran forward toward the sergeant's tall figure, hands outstretched. The youngsters were checked by the men, and fled back to the black shirts showing in the teepee flaps, brown eyes wide with amazement.

"Where is Kakiyaw, Chief of the Pastagan?" Carnes demanded in the native tongue, when the two Mounties reached the sullen group of deerskin-clad figures at the lodges. Glances passed back and forth, but there was no answer.

The sergeant had no intention of allowing the Indians to think he sought favors. "Keep close, and don't let any of them get up behind us," he ordered Burke. "We'll search the teepees."

Half a dozen Indian lodges revealed nothing more than huddles of squaws staring up out of the gloom, brown hands clutching at the almond-eyed children.

The huskies had finished their horrid meal and followed the two men from lodge to lodge; long tongues licking their reddened jaws.

"In here," Carnes said suddenly, after peering at the tribal markings on one of the teepees. He threw back the flap, stared into the darkened interior for a moment, then shoved his way through, followed by the constable.

A VERY old man, clad in a bead-worked capote, was squatted over a little fire. The Indian was apparently warming his hands, though the stinking teepee was airless and suffocating. Kakiyaw had known Carnes many years, but he kept his shock head down, taking no notice of the police.

"Oh, My Father, I have come to make a strong talk," the sergeant commenced in Chippewayan. He squatted opposite the old man, motioning Andy to follow suit.

Kakiyaw thought deeply, then all at once mumbled, "The King's Men are liars! They are not strong! Behold, there are stronger than the Red Coats!"

Carnes' face wrinkled up at the calm insult, but he held himself in check. His voice was still even as he went on, "Kakiyaw talks with a forked tongue. You speak of the trader, Kaster? He is not strong. He is but a child crying in the teepees. I will have him beaten."

A hissing murmur of surprise sounded. The Mountie sensed that moccasin-shod feet were sliding into the lodge. From the overpowering stench of unwashed humanity he knew that the teepee was crowded.

A sudden violent nudging from Burke's elbow brought the sergeant's head about. "Grizzly-face is arrived!" Burke whispered. "Over there, beyond those squaws."

Carnes glanced casually in the direction indicated, just in time to see Kaster's great shoulders disappearing behind the shawled heads. The Mountie's eyes flashed.

"How is this man Kaster strong?" Carnes queried, raising his voice until it filled the lodge. The climax had to come; now was a good time.

There was a faint shuffling of deerskins when the hunters leaned forward to catch the Chief's answer.

A long pause. Then Kakiyaw clucked,

"Hoi, Hoi! He is strong because he brings us to a new country of much fish and fur; telling us to wait until the snows, when we be very rich men. *Enh, enh.*"

The speech brought an echoing volley of satisfied clucks from the Chippewayans.

CARNES started and suddenly sat upright, nudging Burke. "Get that?" he whispered. "By Jupiter, I see it now! Keeping these poor fools of Indians out here to hunt for him; fixing it so that none of the other traders will get the fur. No wonder he does not want the natives to go into the post. No competition, see?"

Burke grunted. He was searching for his pipe in a tunic pocket and only half caught the words.

"The Great Chief's people are very foolish," Carnes commenced again in Chippewayan. "The Paying Man comes from the Far Country bringing the White King's gifts. He waits at the Fort, but behold the hunters do not come. Why is this—"

"The Red Coat speaks many lies!" Kakiyaw broke in, coming out of his crouch all at once. The old man jerked up, beady eyes flaming, the long black hair quivering over his shrunken cheeks.

"A writing talk was made and your White King said thus and thus. That each year fishing nets would be given to my people; powder, flour, and guns. But now the Paying Man comes no more. Kaster, that very strong man, told us these things and he does not speak with two tongues."

"Yai! Yai! He speaks the truth and he is very strong!"

At the new voice Carnes threw himself to his feet to stand staring across the teepee at the shuffling mob of Indians. Then all at once he saw the trader's great frame outlined against the lodge walls.

Kaster elbowed the Indians aside and strode out into the center of the lodge. A great paw waved toward Carnes as the man threw out in Chippewayan:

"This Red Coat lies even as the White King lies! The Paying Man comes no more. This was told to me by the writing papers. I bring you to a country of whitefish and beaver that you may be fat and rich. Then behold these Red Coats come seeking to make you return to the Great Lakes. There children cry in the teepees because of empty bellies and in the traps are no furs. Therefore we will kill these Red Coats and feed them to the huskies—!"

CARNES launched himself through the air in time to a wild chorus of yells from the Indians. He was vaguely conscious of stinging heat as his feet plunged through the fire. Then he lunged at the broad, bearded face—and missed. Kaster's fist stung his head. And now with hands groping for each other's throats, the two men fought across the lodge, only to be flung back from the taut skins forming the walls.

Shocking blows were given and taken in quick succession. Carnes was aware of a babel of voices, the huskies' howling, screams from the women, and Burke's grunts as the constable slashed right and left with his revolver.

Still clutched together, the two fighting men blundered out of the lodge, caught their feet in the low weather curtain and crashed to the hard ground.

Carnes stumbled half upright, hastily wiping the salty sweat out of his eyes. He was watching Kaster getting to his hands and knees; judging time and distance. All at once deerskin legs flashed past the Mountie.

Whug! Whug! Whug!

The sergeant glimpsed a yellow paddle blade whistling through the air; heard three thudding blows and the trader's groans.

Semak, the half-breed, struck again!

Like the other wilderness hunters, the sight of his enemy helpless on the ground had brought all the viler things in the breed's nature leaping to the surface. The years of brutal beatings and heart-numbing repression were suddenly blotted out by one raging moment of delirious, pagan joy. Semak crashed his paddle down again, and leaped back, laughing wildly—just clear of a howling avalanche of huskies!

Something wounded and dying! The age-old wolf instinct flooded the dogs' savage minds. In a moment the doomed man was enveloped by a snarling wave of slashing fangs and striving, tawny backs.

Crash! Crash! Crash!

Three times Carnes fired into the struggling packs. Yelps and snarls answered the shots, but still the heedless dogs tore at each other and their victim. It was useless, the Mountie knew. He might shoot

half the brutes but the remainder would still fight. Filled with nausea, he jerked away—to find himself facing a leaping rush of Indians!

The yelling Chippewayans poured down on the lone white man, black hair streaming, faces ablaze, fringes of the deerskin capotes floating in the wind.

Carnes' revolver spat lead as he jumped forward to meet the oncoming natives. Two pairs of clawing hands swept at empty air; a moment later tore at the earth. The Indians wavered, and stopped. A hundred terrified by one! The age-old courage of the white man supreme.

Then Burke's voice yelling, "They're as yellow as hell! Kick 'em on the shins! Kick 'em—"

The constable's roar was drowned by Semak's high-noted voice shrilling in mixed Cree and Chippewayan, *"Peyattick! Peyattick!* Oh, fools! These be the King's Men. Have not the Dog Spirits taken Kaster? Oh, fools! *Peyattick! Peyattick!"*

MOMENTARILY Carnes' ears picked up these things; he saw the whites of eyes rolling in indecision. Then he swung up the heavy revolver and drove at the Indians. Again and again the Colt's long barrel slammed down on the shock heads and deerskin shoulders. Yells of dismay broke from the Chippewayans. As one man they turned for the shelter of the teepees, thrusting and fighting each other to get away from these Red Coat demons.

In a moment the camping place was empty but for the three wheezing men and the raging dogs.

"Trembling tripe!" Burke panted, wiping a scarlet sleeve on an equally scarlet face. "If I'd had my boots on I'd have showed them boys a few new football wrinkles. But moccasins? Great St. Peter, my toes are all broken!"

Carnes filled his gasping lungs with air, eyes sweeping the silent teepees. "Clear the whole gang out of the lodges, and get them loading the canoes," he ordered. "We'll start them back for the post right away. Quick now; I want to get clear of this place."

Burke waved his revolver and ducked into the nearest teepee. Loud howls answered his entry, and a moment later the lodge belched forth a jumble of scrambling figures. Eyes on the sergeant's tall frame, the Chippewayans threw their camp gear into the long birch-barks, and raced back to tear down the lodges.

"Here, Kakiyaw!" Carnes called to the Chief. "Come here, oh My Father. Be not afraid. I would make a talk."

The old man shuffled forward, his eyes glinting with a mixture of disbelief and hatred. It was evident that he had been badly frightened by the rapid change in the situation.

"Tell your braves to pack up and load the canoes," Carnes said. "Kaster was lying to you. We are going back to get the gifts from the White King."

Burke, standing by now, nodded.

Kakiyaw looked at the white man with distrustful eyes. "How we know? Kaster say he make us fat and rich. Kaster, he dead. How we know?"

Carnes groaned as he tried to think of some way to convince the childlike Indians that he was telling the truth, and that Kaster had been lying to them. It was Semak, Kaster's underling, who saved the situation. "I show proof Kaster he one big liar." From his pocket he pulled a dirty scrap of paper. It read:

"I, Joel Kaster, promise to pay Semak one hundred dollars one year from today." In the corner were the words: "Pierre LaToulle, witness and scribe," and Kaster had signed the paper with a large X.

Carnes' eyes gleamed. "Do you remember, Kakiyaw, Kaster said he had read the writing papers? Look, he couldn't read or write! He signs his name just as you do, with an X!"

Kakiyaw peered at the dirty scrap of paper. "It is so," he said. "Kaster lie. We go. *Awas!* my children, *awas!"*

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KILLERS OF KODIAK

by JAY KARTH

Lawton of Kodiak stalked the narrow streets of Unalaska alone. Every man was his enemy—and death lurked in grey shadows, waiting for his back to turn.

Pope was blasted backward by the slug.

THE coaster had been docked for an hour, and the sounds of cargo and passengers being unloaded had died to a slow mutter of action. Few passengers were still on board, and among them a man strode toward the bridge. Climbing the short ladder, he stood beside the Captain, saying nothing, leaning idly against the rail.

The Captain gave the newcomer a short

glance, then turned away, giving orders through his trumpet. For John Lawton might walk where other men had not the courage bred in them to step.

And John Lawton, leaning still against the rail, flicked his gaze about the town. His face was cruel and rock-hard, as his eyes searched among the groups of natives on the dock, then swung along the settlement's one short street, and there was a sudden fleeting sadness in his eyes, an almost imperceptible sag to his broad shoulders when he failed to find that for which he searched.

He looked back toward the dock as a giant figure loomed in the doorway of the Alaska Trading Company building opposite the *Kuskokwim's* mooring, and walked across the street.

"Who is that man, Captain?" John Lawton said.

The grizzled veteran did not speak for a long moment while he stared at the tableau being enacted on the dock. As the big man advanced toward the ship silence descended over the groups of natives and they opened a wide lane through which he moved like a great jungle cat, for all his immense bulk.

"He is a bad one, that Storm Craig," the Captain said, finally, with an ominous shake of his iron-grey head. "Since Billy Pope disappeared, he has been called the most dangerous man in the North. He is best left alone, that one."

Those unholy lights were dancing again in John Lawton's blue eyes, and the knuckles of his hands were white. "The Yukon Butcher," he breathed softly. He blew gently on the knuckles of his right hand. "What is he doing so far South?"

"He is now legitimate, or so it is told. *He* is the Alaska Trading Company." The Captain gestured toward the legend across the front of the building from which Latimer had emerged a moment before. He again shook his head. "But I do not think so. He has the mark of the wolf, that one. A ptarmigan may change color with the seasons, but a wolf . . . never!"

"Neither does the wolf fight fearlessly, Captain," John Lawton of Kodiak said, softly. "He fights from one direction only . . . the rear." He shrugged, smiled bleakly. "So, one defends the rear, attacks from the front or the two sides, and your wolf is bewildered."

"Ah, John Lawton of Kodiak, but the wolf blood in that man is crossed with the blood of those Kodiak bears of yours." The Captain frowned. "He is not called the Yukon Butcher for nothing."

Lawton's eyes were again bleak. "So I fear," he murmured. His strong fingers touched a small, smooth square of paper in his pocket, a note which read:

"Dere John,

I think i wil die soon. the alaska trading wants my post wich i hav refused to sel. They hav tole me i must sel or die. I had hoped to see my 70 birthday but i am afrade not. if you cum an find me dead the store is yores for old times sakes with you an yore pa who was my best trail buddy. yrs.

O. K. Queen

P. S. you will find my gold ther to. it is yores."

"Captain, I have heard mention of a trader, an independent named Queen, O. K. Queen, who operates a trading post here. Can you point him out to me there on the dock?"

TWO other white men had joined Storm Craig. One was small, with washed-out blue eyes, and a sandy mustache; the second man was tall, with a sunken chest, who coughed continuously.

Another, a small, heavily-bearded man dressed in a priest's garb, stood among the natives. John Lawton studied him thoughtfully.

"He is not there," the Captain said. He looked at Lawton strangely. "That is very odd. This is the first time he has failed to meet the *Kuskokwim* in . . . yes, in many years."

Too well did John Lawton of Kodiak know that the tall, spare figure, supporting that fine, proud head, was not among the scum gathered like vultures down there. He would have recognized him anywhere, even after these long years. For the grand old veteran of the Alaska gold trails had taught him all the trail lore he knew; had taken him as a cub and fostered him until now his name was respected and feared

from Point Barrow to Ketchikan, from Attu to Dawson.

"Thanks!"

John Lawton's firm mouth was a thin, straight line, and his jaw muscles were drawn into tight knots as he left the bridge of the *Kuskokwim*.

When he stepped lightly across from the gently-rolling deck of the coaster to the dock a moment later, Storm Craig eyed him up and down, then called up to the Captain, "This all yuh got fer us this trip, Cap'n?"

"Aye, Craig," the iron-jawed seaman said, coldly, "And a few boxes of freight 'neath the for'ard hatch."

Lawton was half way across the dock, walking toward the bearded man in priest's habilaments, when Craig, a scowl on his heavy face, stepped in front of him. "I'm Craig," he boomed, "Storm Craig." He waved a grimy thumb over his shoulder, toward the A. T. building. "Yuh go sign that register in yonder."

Craig's two companions ranged up just back of his shoulders, thumbs hooked in wide belts. Both watched Lawton warily, half sneers on their faces. The tall man coughed rackingly, and a spasm of pain momentarily extinguished the leer.

Up on the bridge of the *Kuskokwim*, her flint-eyed skipper reached across to his chart table and hefted a wicked looking automatic in his right hand, then leaned both elbows over the bridge rail. He would watch developments below, for he believed in fair play, and he liked this clean-cut John Lawton of Kodiak immensely.

THE only sound as Lawton turned slowly and faced the larger man full on was the slapping of the waves on the pilings below. The creosote permeated air was explosive with silence. His sharp, blue eyes gauged Craig's two henchmen, then dismissed them momentarily, swinging back to Craig.

"Do you operate a hotel, Craig?" Lawton's voice was deceptively soft.

"Ho ho ho ho," Craig roared, "hotel, he says . . . do I run a ho —"

Crack—crack! Lawton's left hand, first the palm, then a backhand, smacked with singing force against the giant's face. At the same instant Lawton moved back and to his right, so that he had all three men in full view, and so that his back was to the *Kuskokwim*.

"Jees," a member of the *Kuskokwim's* crew breathed from a safe position in the waist of the vessel, "the Yukon Butcher's the fastest gun-slinger in the North. That Lawton's a dead one for sure." Then his mouth gaped open, and his eyes popped wide with unbelief. For before he had finished voicing his prediction, swift, explosive action had begun, and was finished, and three men stood with hands upraised, sound whip-cracking aloud the wharf.

John Lawton of Kodiak, one moment dwarfed in the shadow of the giant Craig, his hands empty, suddenly loomed above the entire assembly. There was a gun in his hand, miraculously, a gun which he had fired once warningly.

The skipper of the *Kuskokwim* transferred his automatic from his right hand to his left, then, without taking his eyes away from the scene below, reached out and tossed the weapon gently back to the top of the chart table.

Lawton's nostrils flared slightly as the sharp, acrid odor of burnt gun-powder, rising in a thin smoke stream from the uptilted gun-muzzle, eddied around his face.

"That's my signature, Craig," he said, evenly. "Don't make me punctuate, because it will be even with your rotten heart."

The faces of Craig's men were blanched with fear and shock, but the big man's pig-black eyes shone murderously. "Yuh'd better dot yuh'r period now, Mister," he rumbled. "If yuh don't, I'll hev yuh'r head." Without taking his eyes off Lawton's face, he said, "Who is this damned fool, Cap'n?"

"That *damn fool* is John Lawton of Kodiak, Craig, and a good man he is, I'd say." The Captain spat, clearing the rail neatly.

"Jees." It was the sailor in the waist of the ship. *"That Lawton!"* His eyes shone. "An' me a'thinkin' all tha while he was one o' them frontier jool'ry salesmen, a'ridin' tha bridge for tha thrill. Jees!"

Lawton of Kodiak! The name ran across the dock with electrifying swiftness. The natives whispered excitedly among themselves. *John Lawton of Kodiak!*

Even Storm Craig, the Yukon Butcher, was taken aback for a moment. But the *Kuskokwim's* skipper had hit the nail on the head. There was bear blood in this man!

"Yuh win this round, Lawton," he growled, hate in his eyes, "but yuh'd better get back aboard tha *Kuskokwim* while yuh'r still able tuh stand on yuh'r hind legs without bein' propped up!"

"Get out," John Lawton said, evenly.

"MAY I extend a more appropriate welcome to you, John Lawton of Kodiak." The little man in priest's garb stood at Lawton's elbow, a gentle smile hovering on his bearded lips. Lawton saw that he had only one eye.

"Thank you," John Lawton said.

"I am Father Rosoff," the little man said, suavely, "of the Russian Orthodox Church. I am at your service."

"Will you direct me to Queen's trading post," Lawton said.

"You... were a friend of O. K. Queen?"

"Were?" Lawton said.

"Queen is dead, John Lawton," the little, one-eyed man said. He folded his hands across his breast.

"How did he die?"

"I do not know."

John Lawton considered Rosoff's words for a long minute. "A man dies, in this small settlement," he said, finally, "Yet you do not know the manner of his death, nor the cause. That seems strange."

The Russian placed his fingers to his brow. "I have been ill, my friend. I should not have come to the dock." He placed a small hand on Lawton's arm. "Will you assist me, please. We will go to my house, where we may talk more comfortably."

Settled in Rosoff's library, Lawton heard the Russian say, "Queen met a horrible death." There was deep compassion in his voice. "He was beheaded!"

"So?" John Lawton's eyes were twin wells of blue flame as he waited for Rosoff to continue.

"His head was not found!" Rosoff shuddered.

"You suspect that he may have been dead before his head was removed . . . is that what you mean?"

"Yes!"

"Who would do such a thing?"

The Russian lifted his small hands daintily, the pale, slender fingers outstretched expressively. "In this country," he said, "who knows? Especially in this summer season, when the traders go north, and the salmon fleets converge on Bristol Bay. There are bad ones among them, John Lawton, who would slit your throat for a single gold piece. There are the outlaw cruisers of the seal and otter poachers, who make port here for supplies. Many of them undoubtedly knew, or at least suspected, that Queen scorned to send his gold out to the States, for banking."

"Would anyone want to get Queen out of Unalaska," Lawton said, "to gain control of his trading post?"

"Storm Craig is his only competitor."

"Could he have killed Queen?"

"Ordinarily, one would suspect him. But with my own eyes I saw him take his cruiser out of the bay to the Bering two days before Queen's body was found, and he did not return until three days after he was buried."

"He could not have returned without being seen?" Lawton said.

"It would have been difficult."

"Did he say where he went on this trip?"

"Yes," Rosoff said, "he operates a silver fox farm on the largest of the Fox Islands, across Akuian Pass, out there." He pointed to the northward. "He came into possession six years ago, when the original owner died of small-pox. Craig had a deed in his possession, and took over, placing three of his men over there."

John Lawton rose to his feet. "Thank you," he said.

"What are you going to do?" Rosoff asked.

"I have a little job to do," Lawton said, softly.

He left the church compound and walked down to the *Kuskokwim's* mooring. "Captain," he said, "if I am not on this dock when you return, wireless the Coast Guard to stand in and find out what's happened to me."

"Aye, Lawton," the skipper lit a smelly, short-stemmed pipe, "but why call in the Coast Guard? My crew'd like some excitement. I'll be back here in eight days." He squinted at Lawton through a cloud of

smoke from his pipe. "You *be* here, all in one piece."

"GET Craig," Lawton said.

The thin man behind the counter coughed rackingly. His face was a sickly white in the poor light of Craig's large merchandise room.

"He ain't here." His voice was a thin, whining wheeze.

"Get Craig," Lawton said, softly. His right hand slid beneath his coat.

The thin man took the hint and disappeared through one of the two doors in the rear. Lawton heard voices, one the deep, growling rumble of big Storm Craig; then both men appeared.

"I'll take care of this, Eddie," Craig rumbled.

Eddie slid behind the long counter.

Storm Craig lumbered straight down the long room toward Lawton. His second companion, the small man with the sandy mustache, was not in sight.

"Yuh'r a fool, Lawton, trying tuh horn in here," Craig growled.

"Queen was my friend, Craig." Lawton was swaying gently on the balls of his feet.

The giant stiffened. His small black eyes were hard as agate as he watched Lawton's face, unblinking. Even with his formidable gun out of reach, and facing one of the fastest gun-slicks in Alaska, the big man was unafraid. He just stood there, waiting.

"I'm going to get the man who took his head, Craig." John Lawton's voice was almost a whisper, but it carried with startling clarity to the farthest confines of the room.

Then Craig began cursing him. "Lawton," he said, finally, "I ain't a'feared of yuh, an' I'm a'goin tuh get yuh, like I said, cause this place ain't big enough fer both of us." He shook his great head. "But I didn't take Queen's head. Mebbe I've killed a few men in my time, an' mebbe I've sliced off a bit of their ears, but I never cut off any of a man what wouldn't grow back on!"

"You'd better be telling the truth, Craig. I'll know soon enough." Lawton backed toward the door.

Twenty feet from the door, he stiffened, crouched, his gaze caught as Eddie's weak eyes flickered from Lawton to a spot on Lawton's right as if drawn by a magnet; and, in the flickering of an eye, hell broke loose in the confines of the big room. Lawton dropped flat just as a heavy caliber gun roared. The slugs bit into the floor inches beyond his body. He was rolling to his right as he hit the floor. His gun was in his hand with the second rolling turn, spitting thundering death.

He was back on his feet, almost at the instant that a body thudded to the floor back of the long counter, facing Eddie and Craig. Neither had moved. Eddie went into a paroxysm of coughing. Craig must have been convinced that Lawton would be killed by the man who lay behind the counter. A faint surprise lay deep in his black eyes. He watched Lawton carefully.

"Don't move," Lawton said, thinly. He moved across to the end of the counter. The small man lay crumbled on the floor, the right side of his sandy mustache was covered with white flour, which poured from a broken sack on the shelf above, and was filtering through the mustache hairs into his open mouth. There were two round holes in the center of his forehead.

He laughed openly at Craig — backed from the room.

The giant's black eyes were mere pin points as he watched John Lawton back out through the door to the street.

WHEN Lawton reached the street, the *Kuskokwim* was laying down a smoke trail as she stood out toward the open Bering. There were two small, black-hulled traders lying at anchor in the bay.

A sixty-foot cruiser was moored at the upper end of the A. T. dock.

Excited murmurs could be heard from behind village doors as John Lawton strode down the street toward Queen's store, and when he had found the door locked, and kicked it in, two young Aleuts' followed him inside.

"We were the white-haired one's boys," one said, "we would work for you, also."

"You mean Queen?" Lawton said.

Both nodded, affirmatively. Their black eyes sparkled.

"There may be danger here," Lawton warned them.

"We are not afraid of the evil eye. We think you stronger!"

Lawton nodded his consent. Next, looking closely at the shelves, he nodded his head with satisfaction, and passed through the store. In the living quarters at the rear, he found the spot where Queen's body had lain. He studied the dark stains on the floor for several minutes, his brow wrinkled. Then he returned to the store. The place had been searched. Merchandise had been removed from the shelves and replaced haphazardly.

A call from one of the Indian boys brought Lawton to the porch. The boy pointed. Two of Craig's Indians were carrying the body of the sandy-mustached man toward the little graveyard beyond the settlement. But Lawton's interest was held by sight of Storm Craig crossing the dock toward the moored cruiser. A few minutes later the powerful diesels sent the sturdy craft, with Craig at the wheel, out past the two traders anchored in the bay, toward the open sea.

The Indian was frightened. He spoke rapidly, "Last time he go, the white-haired one die. Mebbe this time . . ."

Lawton paid no attention to the Indian's words. His gaze was centered on the slight figure of Rosoff. The man was stepping daintily down the steps of the A. T. Company porch, a small package under his arm. Lawton stood silently until the little man, with his mincing steps, was abreast the door.

Rosoff paused. "I heard the shooting, Mister Lawton," he said, in his gentle voice, "and have administered last rites over the body of that poor foolish person back there. It is such a pleasure to see you still alive."

"Where is Craig bound, Rosoff?" Lawton said, shortly.

The Russian looked at Lawton with a momentary glint in his one eye. "I do not like your tone, Mister Lawton." Then the good eye was guilelessly soft again. "But of course you are sad because of your friend, or should I say *our* friend, Queen." He lifted his shoulders. "As to Craig, his words were that he would go to the Fox Islands, across the Pass." He lifted his shoulders again. "It is so difficult, really, to know what that man will do." Without waiting for Lawton to speak, he resumed his mincing course toward the church compound. "Good afternoon, Mister Lawton."

Storm Craig's cruiser was a small speck far out in the Pass. The finely patterned crows-feet beneath Lawton's blue eyes stood out plainly as he followed her course until she had passed behind a screen of hazy distance. He dropped his gaze for a moment to the spot in the street where Rosoff had stood a few minutes before, then turned into the store, his expression thoughtful.

The Indian boy halted his work at Lawton entered. "That Latimer . . . he a very bad man. We be careful, huh?" There was deep concern in his black eyes.

Lawton smiled grimly. "Yes . . ." he looked at the Indian. "What is your name?" he said.

"You call me Billy-Bob. That name White-Haired one give me. I like!"

"All right, Billy-Bob," Lawton's grim smile softened. "We be very careful."

"That good," Billy-Bob grunted. He barked a command to the second Indian.

A WEEK passed. The consumptive Eddie kept his distance. Rosoff, entrenched in the compound, seldom appeared. Lawton played a waiting game, his sharp blue eyes fixed on the unsettled waters of Akuian Pass. But the half dozen vessels standing in to the anchorage for fresh water and supplies were traders, bound into Arctic waters for the summer's trading. Storm Craig's cruiser did not appear.

Lawton and his two Indians did a brisk business with the traders, Queen's reputation for fairness bringing their skippers to his door.

The days were long, the sun rising about two A.M., and setting at ten P.M., with a period of half twilight, half darkness between those hours. It was an hour after darkness had fallen, on the seventh night, that the Indian, Billy-Bob, awakened Lawton, who was stretched fully clothed on a cot in the rear room.

"You come quick," the Indian said.

Lawton, instantly awake, followed him through the building. They stood at a darkened window for several minutes before the boy exclaimed, *"There!"*

Lawton saw the faint, winking light at the same instant. It was far out in the Pass. Flash, flash. A pause, Another

flash, then another, then darkness.

Lawton nodded with satisfaction. "This may be it," he said, softly. "You go home to your wife, now, Billy-Bob." He patted the Indian's shoulder.

"You not stay here by 'self?" Billy-Bob was alarmed.

Lawton nodded, absently, eyes on the Pass.

"All right. I go. But think not good!" He slipped wraithlike into the outer darkness, melting with the front of the building.

With another glance toward the darkened Pass, Lawton returned to his bedroom, where he undressed casually, and stretched out on the cot, his big forty-four under his blanket, ready for instant use. He kept his gaze on the room's one door and window. While he waited, he chewed on a small, raggedly torn strip of white paper, chewed until it was a pulpy mass. It was the bottom of Queen's letter, containing the postscript.

An hour passed. And then, for one of the few times in his life, John Lawton was taken completely by surprise. He heard a slight sound in the darkness of the opposite corner but was not alarmed because he expected trouble to come through the door, or the window. When he realized his mistake, it was too late. Two figures loomed in the middle of the dark room, their faces hidden behind black cloth masks. They evidently wanted to take him alive and without shooting. His wrist was numbed by a blow from a long pistol barrel. He was knocked to the floor; but, desperately, he swung his body, legs bunched against his chest, and rammed both feet with catapult force into the midsections of his assailants. Both groaned with anguish and one collapsed. But the other, aided by two more masked men who erupted, it seemed, from the floor, smothered even John Lawton's strength. A well-directed blow stunned him. When he regained his senses, he was trussed into a sitting position on his cot, back to the wall.

"Lawton, where is Queen's money?" The voice was muffled, and Lawton failed to recognize it.

"I don't know what you are talking about," he said. He knew these men had entered through a well concealed trap door in the floor. He strained to recognize them, but the darkness was too complete. He knew one thing: One of them had a heavy beard.

"You won't live through the night, unless you talk." The speaker leaned forward and struck Lawton twice, with his right fist.

"So the torture begins." Lawton's voice was contemptuous.

"*You* can stop it!"

"How?"

A blow ripped Lawton's tight jaw.

"Okay, sucker, you're asking for it!"

THE man hit Lawton again, across the mouth. "Talk fast, you fool."

"Why should I tell you, even if I knew. You rats intend killing me, anyhow. You might as well do it now."

There was a whispered consultation in the rear. A second figure stepped forward. "The damn fool's giving it to us straight." This was Storm Craig's booming voice. And now he made no effort to conceal his voice or identity. "He's givin' it to us straight," he repeated, "he wouldn't talk in a thousan' years. Gag him."

Lawton was bundled roughly into the tunnel. They came into the open suddenly, and Lawton saw that they were behind the village. He was carried to the rear of the A. T. building, where he was trussed more firmly. And then he knew what his captors intended doing with him. They were attaching a heavy weight to his ankles! They were going to drown him!

He said a silent prayer as he was lifted bodily and carried around the corner of the building to the dock. Storm Craig gestured. Lawton felt himself falling. He was aware of the double splash when his body and the weight broke the surface. The water was icy cold. There was a rushing sound in his ears as the weight dragged him down.

This was it!

But he was mistaken! Lungs almost bursting, he felt a body flash down beside him. A razor-edged knife slashed the heavy rope holding the weight, then Lawton and his rescuer were rising rapidly toward the surface. They broke water underneath the dock. His rescuer clamped his legs around one of the creosoted pilings and used both hands to remove Lawton's gag and bonds.

It was Billy-Bob!

IT was thirty minutes before dawn when John Lawton left Billy-Bob's cabin, where he had been given dry clothing, and two guns—O. K. Queen's old trail guns. Billy-Bob had got them, somehow, after Queen had been killed, and it was fitting that John Lawton of Kodiak should have them now. He stepped forth into predawn shadows and strode down the narrow street, bordered on the one side by sturdy old buildings, standing like sentinels since the first white men set foot in these northern Islands, and on the other by the lapping waters of the bay. He walked with his shoulders straight and his fine young head back. Walked toward Craig's stronghold, heavy guns swinging against his thighs.

Out on the waters of the bay the two dark-hulled traders still swung at anchor, but lights were flashing up through their portholes, and they would probably stand out to sea with the coming of dawn. A faint hail floated across the darkened waters. But John Lawton was listening only for sound from within the big building. He tried the knob of the door, found the door unlocked. Turning the knob gently, he reached out a pack-clad foot and shoved, both hands hovering just above and ahead of his guns.

The door swung silently open. But the big room was empty. A single oil lamp burned fitfully, throwing an eerie radiance across the space, leaving black shadows in the corners and back of the counters.

John Lawton stepped inside, his face a hard mask in the flickering light. He advanced, with silent, measured steps, down the length of the room. He paused only once, to throw a keen, swift glance back toward the shadows he had passed. He halted, finally, before the two doors in the rear, and listened intently. For a moment he heard nothing. Then the faint murmur of voices reached his ears from the opposite side of the door on his left. As he stepped toward this door, it swung open. The thin-chested Eddie stood framed in the glow from the room beyond.

He saw Lawton and screamed, horribly, the scream ending in a gasping, blood-flecked gurgle. He slumped to the floor, loose-necked, and with his mouth wide open. His heart had given out at sight of this apparition from the watery grave of the bay!

Over Eddie's body as he crumbled in the doorway, John Lawton saw a man with a heavy black beard, standing squat and powerful in the middle of the room. The bearded man reached for the gun at his hip, but his draw was slow compared to the lightning-like motion of John Lawton. His gun was hardly half way out of the holster when Lawton's right-hand gun roared and spat a jagged tongue of flame. A blank, vacant expression appeared on the bearded man's dark face, and he died there, clumsily, just as he must have moved all through life.

After the roar of Queen's big gun in his hand, Lawton felt the sudden silence beating in against him with a deafened, dangerous quality. A draft from the opened door caused the flame in the oil lamp to flicker fitfully. He stood lightly, on the balls of his feet, his back in the shadows of the big room, his face bathed in the glow from the flickering light in the death room. He listened intently, but of Storm Craig and the fourth man there was neither sight, nor sound. Lawton stepped across Eddie's dead body.

"Drop it, Lawton!"

IT was Craig, who had flattened his great bulk against the wall just inside the door. Lawton dropped his gun.

"Now the other one!" The giant spat, triumphant.

Lawton unfastened his belts. The heavy gun thudded against the floor.

"Now move to the middle of tha room an' push that table over yonder." Storm Craig indicated a corner of the room. "Move that, too." He motioned, with his gun-muzzle, at the bearded man's body. "An' don't try tuh douse tha light. I'll drill yuh."

John Lawton obeyed the commands.

Storm Craig then did a strange thing. He kicked the belts and Lawton's guns through the door into the big room, then, without looking down, slid his heavy pack-boot under the dead Eddie's neck and swung his body around against the wall. "It seems I cain't kill yuh with guns," he rumbled, "or drown yuh . . . so I'm a'goin' tuh finish yuh with my hands." He tossed his own gun after Lawton's, then closed and locked the door.

rumbled, flexing the muscles of his arm.

Those flickering lights were in Lawton's eyes again. His arm were like rapiers in the hands of a master. In and out, slashing and cutting Craig's face to ribbons.

It was then that the big man finally caught up with him. Caught him in a corner, from which his nimble feet would not let him escape. Caught him, and wrapped those powerful arms around his laboring chest, and John Lawton thought, then, that Craig would make good his boast.

Then he was free! He tottered back into the comparative safety of the center of the room, Craig blindly following him, long arms outstretched, his face a horrible mask of smashed, bloody flesh, eyes completely closed. John Lawton evaded the long arms, while he pulled strength-giving air into his tired lungs. Then, putting all his remaining strength into the blows, he hit Storm Craig five times. A right, a left, and another right across the jaw, and twice in the pit of the stomach. The big man's arms dropped. He stood there in the center of the room, helpless, yet he would not drop. Lawton measured him, swung a terrific right to his jaw. Still he stood for a long minute, then, whimpering in the anguish of defeat, his great bulk crashed to the floor.

LAWTON saw that the big man was finished. He stood over him for a time, rubbing the fingers of his right hand into the tired muscles of his left arm, pulling in deep draughts of air, then he moved to the door. Unlocking it, he passed into the next room and retrieved his guns.

So it was that he returned to Queen's store. And, entering he was not surprised when he saw at the far end of the long room the Russian Rosoff. Only now he was minus his priestly robes, and there was a gun strapped to his maidenly waist.

"I thought perhaps you'd be here, *Billy Pope,*" Lawton said, softly. "You followed Queen a long time for your revenge, didn't you. Followed him until he was an old man, and even then you had to slip up behind him. And you hired Storm Craig and his crew to help you." That death light gleamed in John Lawton's eyes. "One old man against an entire pack of ham-stringing wolves." He swung to a halt thirty feet down the room from Pope. *"I'm going to kill you, Pope. I'm going to kill you dead."*

"There is a slight difference of opinion, Mister Lawton," the killer's voice was soft. *"You* will die in this room. But before you die, as a sporting gesture, would you mind telling me if you found Queen's gold? One is naturally curious."

Lawton nodded toward the shelves on his right, without taking his sharp blue eyes away from Pope's face. "Over there on that shelf. The money's in those shoe boxes, just under the advertising streamer that reads 'Seventieth birthday stock of Wear-Hard shoes.'"

"Clever," Pope said. "Yes, I have followed Queen for many years. He blinded me, you know, in my right eye." Hatred gleamed from the one good eye, and his lips curled. "It was easy. His sight had been failing for several years, and I had grown this beard. Then, my plan was simplified, when I was able to kill the Russian priest who was enroute here to take charge of this district for his church. Yes, I killed Queen. And I took his head! I wanted . . ." a mad gleam appeared in the brown eye. He chuckled horribly. *"I wanted his eyes . . . both of his eyes!"*

It was then that he drew. Drew with all the cunning, with all the lightning-like rapidity for which his name was famed throughout the northland; drew, and the muzzle of his gun belched hot flame. And then his mouth opened daintily, and he took three mincing steps, and fell forward, on his face, his gun making a dull thumping sound as it struck the floor. There was a round, gaping hole in his forehead, dead center between his one good and one bad eye.

John Lawton of Kodiak stepped forth into the young light of the new dawn. Out across the blue waters of the bay the *Kuskokwim* was standing in from Akuian Pass. Her grizzled, veteran skipper, when he saw John Lawton through his glasses, issued an order to his mate:

"Have the men turn in all firearms." He shook his grizzled head. "There's *never* any excitement on this run, anymore."

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